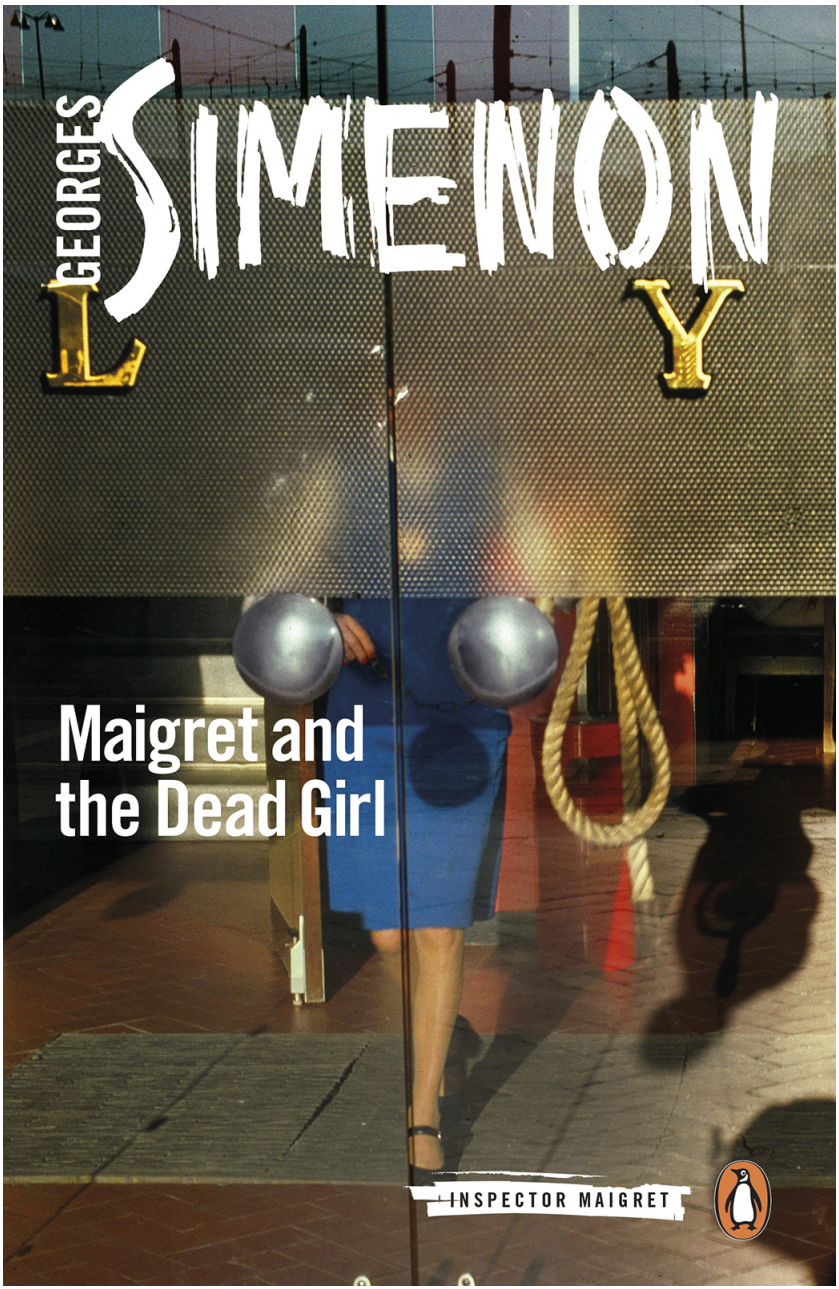
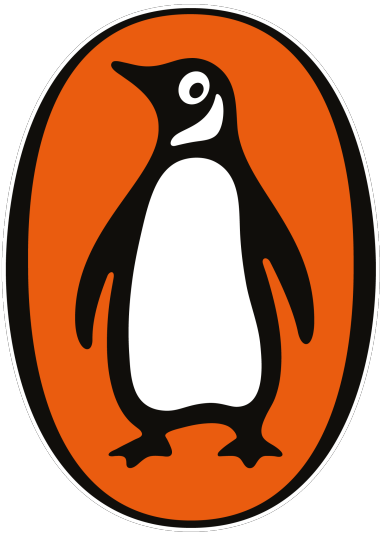

GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret and
the Dead Girl
INSPECTOR MAIGRET



Georges Simenon

MAIGRET AND THE DEAD GIRL

Translated by HOWARD CURTIS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

> My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points … 'understand and judge not'.

Penguin is publishing the entire series of Maigret novels.

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‘Simenon ought to be spoken of in the same breath as Camus, Beckett and Kafka’
— *Independent on Sunday*

1.

In which Inspector Lognon discovers a body and complains that it is being taken away from him

Maigret yawned and pushed the papers to the edge of the desk.

'Sign this, boys, and you can go to bed.'

The 'boys' were probably the three toughest characters to have been through the offices of the Police Judiciaire in a year. One of them, the one they called Dédé, looked like a gorilla, and even the slimmest of the three, who had a black eye, could have earned his living as a fairground wrestler.

Janvier passed them the papers and a pen. Now that they had finally confessed, they were no longer bothering to argue and didn't even read their statements, just signed wearily.

It was a few minutes past three by the marble clock, and most of the offices at police headquarters on Quai des Orfèvres were shrouded in darkness. For a long while now, there had been no noise apart from the occasional distant car horn or the brakes of a taxi as it skidded on the wet roadway. When they had arrived the previous day, the offices had been deserted, too, because it wasn't yet nine o'clock in the morning, and the staff hadn't come in yet. It had been raining even then, with that thin, sad rain that was still falling.

They had now been within these walls for nearly twenty hours, sometimes together, sometimes separately, while Maigret and five of his colleagues had taken turns at grilling them.

‘Idiots!’ Maigret had said as soon as he saw them. ‘This is going to take a long time.’

Idiots are stubborn and always take the longest time to spill the beans. They imagine that if they don’t answer, or they come out with any old nonsense, even if it means contradicting themselves every five minutes, they will somehow get away with it. Thinking they are smarter than anybody else, they invariably start by showing off.

‘Don’t think you’re going to get me!’

For months, they had been operating in the area of Rue la Fayette, and the newspapers called them the wall breakers. Thanks to an anonymous telephone call, they had finally been arrested.

There were still coffee dregs in the cups and a small enamel coffee-pot on a portable stove. Everyone was grey-faced, with drawn features. Maigret had smoked so much that his throat was irritated. Once the three men were taken away, he would suggest to Janvier that they go somewhere for onion soup. His desire for sleep had passed. It was at about eleven o’clock that he had had a sudden feeling of tiredness and had gone to his office for a quick doze. But now, the last thing on his mind was sleep.

‘Ask Vacher to come and get them.’

Just as they were leaving the inspectors’ office, the telephone rang. Maigret picked up the receiver.

‘Who’s that?’ a voice asked.

He frowned and did not reply immediately.

‘Jussieu?’ the voice continued at the other end of the line.

That was the name of the inspector who should have been on duty. Maigret had sent him home at ten o’clock.

‘No,’ he grunted, ‘Maigret.’

‘Sorry, detective chief inspector. Raymond here, from the central switchboard.’

The call came from the other building, from the vast room where all police emergency calls ended up. As soon as the glass on one of those red call-boxes found throughout Paris was broken, a little light came on somewhere on a map that occupied a large part of one wall, and a man would insert a plug into one of the sockets of the switchboard.

‘Central switchboard. Go ahead.’

Sometimes it was a fight, sometimes a troublesome drunk, sometimes an officer on the beat who needed help.

The switchboard operator would insert a plug into another socket.

'Rue de Grenelle station? Is that you, Justin? Send a van to the embankment, number 210 …'

There were two or three men on night duty at the central switchboard, and they probably also made themselves coffee. Sometimes, when it was something serious, they alerted the Police Judiciaire. At other times, they would simply phone headquarters to say hello to a friend. Maigret knew Raymond.

'Jussieu's left,' he said. 'Did you have anything in particular to tell him?'

'Only that the body of a young girl has been found on Place Vintimille.'

'Any details?'

'The men from the second district should be on the scene by now. I got the call three minutes ago.'

'Thanks a lot.'

The three robbers had left the office. Janvier returned, red-eyed as he always was when he had to stay overnight, and with stubble that gave him an unhealthy look.

Maigret put on his coat and looked for his hat. 'Coming?'

They went down the stairs, one behind the other. Normally, they would have gone to Les Halles for their onion soup. Seeing the little black cars lined up in the courtyard, Maigret hesitated.

'A young girl has been found dead on Place Vintimille,' he said. Then, like someone looking for an excuse not to go to bed: 'Shall we have a look?'

Janvier got in behind the wheel of one of the cars. They were both too dazed after the long interrogation they had just conducted to speak.

It didn't occur to Maigret that the second district was Lognon's patch – Lognon, the man his colleagues nicknamed Inspector Hard-Done-By. Even if he had thought of it, it wouldn't have made any difference, because Lognon wasn't necessarily on night shift at the Rue de La Rochefoucauld station.

The streets were wet and deserted, with fine drops of rain forming haloes around the street lamps and the odd shadowy figure hugging the walls. There was one café still open on the corner of Rue Montmartre and the Grands Boulevards, and further on they glimpsed the neon lights of two or three nightclubs, with taxis

waiting outside at the kerb.

Although not far from Place Blanche, Place Vintimille was like an island of calm. A police van was parked there. Near the gate to the tiny park in the middle, four or five men were standing around a light-coloured shape lying on the ground.

Maigret immediately recognized Lognon's short, thin figure. Inspector Hard-Done-By had moved away from the group to see who was coming, and he, too, recognized Maigret and Janvier.

'Damn!' Maigret muttered.

Because, obviously, Lognon would again accuse him of doing it deliberately. This was his neighbourhood, his patch. Something dramatic had taken place on his shift, something that might perhaps give him the opportunity to distinguish himself that he had been waiting for all these years. And now a series of chance occurrences had brought Maigret to the scene almost at the same time as him!

'Did they phone you at home?' he asked suspiciously, already convinced that there was a conspiracy against him.

'I was at headquarters. Raymond rang. I came to have a look.'

Maigret certainly wasn't going to leave without knowing what it was all about just to avoid hurting Lognon's feelings.

'Is she dead?' he asked, pointing to the woman lying on the pavement.

Lognon nodded. Three uniformed officers were there, as well as a couple who had been passing and who, Maigret learned later, had spotted the body and raised the alarm. If it had happened only a hundred metres away, a large crowd would already have gathered, but not many people go through Place Vintimille at night.

'Who is she?'

'We don't know. She doesn't have any papers.'

'No handbag?'

'No.'

Maigret took a few steps and bent down. The young woman was lying on her right side, one cheek on the wet pavement, one of her feet shoeless.

'Have they found her shoe?'

Lognon shook his head. It was quite startling to see her toes through the silk stocking. She was wearing a pale-blue satin evening gown, and, perhaps because of the position she was in, this gown seemed too big for her.

The face was young: no more than twenty or so, Maigret thought.

‘What about the doctor?’

‘I’m waiting. He should be here soon.’

Maigret turned to Janvier. ‘Call Criminal Records and get them to send some photographers.’

There was no blood visible on the dress. Maigret shone a torch belonging to one of the officers on the face and noticed that the one visible eye was slightly swollen, as was the upper lip.

‘No coat?’ he asked.

It was March. The air was quite mild, although not mild enough to walk about at night, especially in the rain, in a light gown that left the shoulders bare and was held up only by narrow straps.

‘She probably wasn’t killed here,’ Lognon murmured glumly, as if he was doing his duty by helping Maigret, but was personally losing interest in the case.

He was deliberately keeping his distance. Janvier had set off for one of the bars on Place Blanche to telephone. A taxi soon stopped, bringing a local doctor.

‘You can have a look, doctor, but don’t move her before the photographers get here. There’s no doubt she’s dead.’

The doctor bent down and touched the wrist and the chest, then stood up again without a word, quite unconcerned, and waited like the others.

‘Are you coming?’ asked the woman, who was holding her husband’s arm and was starting to feel cold.

‘Wait a bit.’

‘What for?’

‘I don’t know. They must be about to do something.’

Maigret turned to them. ‘Have you given your names and address?’

‘To that gentleman, yes.’

They pointed to Lognon.

‘What time was it when you discovered the body?’

They looked at each other.

‘We left the cabaret at three.’

‘Five past three,’ the woman corrected him. ‘I looked at my watch while you were getting your coat.’

‘Whatever time it was, it only took us three or four minutes to get here. We were going to walk round the outside of the square when I saw a splash of colour on the pavement.’

‘Was she already dead?’

‘I suppose so. She wasn’t moving.’

‘You didn’t touch her?’

The man shook his head. ‘I sent my wife to inform the police. There’s a police emergency call box on the corner of Boulevard de Clichy. I know it well because we live nearby, on Boulevard des Batignolles.’

Janvier soon came back. ‘They’ll be here in a few minutes,’ he announced.

‘I don’t suppose Moers was there?’

Although he couldn’t have said why, Maigret had the impression that this was the start of quite a complicated case. He waited, his pipe in his mouth, his hands in his pockets, glancing every now and again at the form lying on the ground. The blue gown wasn’t at all new, and the material was quite ordinary. It could have been the dress of one of the many hostesses who worked in the clubs of Montmartre. The shoe, too, a silver shoe with a very high heel and a worn sole, could have belonged to one of them.

The first idea that came to mind was that a hostess, on her way home, had been attacked by someone who had stolen her handbag. But in that case, one of the shoes wouldn’t have disappeared, and the attacker wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of removing the victim’s coat.

‘She must have been killed elsewhere,’ he said to Janvier in a low voice.

Lognon, who had his ears peeled, heard this, and gave a kind of bitter grin: he had been the first to put forward this theory.

If she had been killed elsewhere, why had the body been left on this square? It wasn’t likely that the killer had carried the young woman on his shoulder. He must have used a car. In that case, it would have been easy for him to hide her on some patch of waste ground or throw her in the Seine.

Maigret wouldn’t have admitted that what intrigued him most was the victim’s face. All he had seen of it so far was one profile. Was it the bruises that gave her that sullen air? She looked like a bad-tempered little girl. Her combed-back brown hair was very smooth but naturally wavy. The rain had diluted her make-up a little, and, instead of making her older or uglier, it made her younger and more appealing.

‘Come here a moment, Lognon.’

Maigret drew him aside.

‘I’m listening, chief.’

‘Do you have any thoughts about this?’

‘You know perfectly well I never have any thoughts. I’m just a local inspector.’

‘Ever seen the girl before?’

Lognon knew the area around Place Blanche and Place Pigalle better than anyone.

‘Never.’

‘A hostess?’

‘If she is, she’s not a regular. I know just about all of them.’

‘I’m going to need you.’

‘You don’t have to say that just to please me. Once Quai des Orfèvres gets involved, it’s none of my business any more. Not that I’m complaining. It’s only natural. I’m used to it. You just have to give me my orders and I’ll do my best.’

‘The best thing you can do right now is question the doormen of the nightclubs, don’t you think?’

Lognon glanced at the body and sighed. ‘I’m on to it.’

In his mind, he was deliberately being sent away. They watched him cross the street with that eternally weary walk of his, and he took care not to turn round.

The car from Criminal Records arrived. One of the officers on the scene was making an effort to get rid of a drunk who had approached and was becoming indignant at the fact that nobody was helping the ‘little lady’.

‘You’re all the same, you coppers. Just because someone’s had a bit too much to drink …’

Once the photographs had been taken, the doctor was able to bend over the body and turn it on to its back, revealing the whole face, which now looked even younger.

‘How did she die?’ Maigret asked.

‘Fractured skull.’ The doctor had his fingers in the dead girl’s hair. ‘She was struck on the head with a very heavy object, a hammer, a spanner, a piece of lead piping, something like that. Before that, she’d been struck in the face, probably punched.’

‘Can you determine the approximate time of death?’

‘In my opinion, between two and three in the morning. Dr Paul will be able to tell you more after the postmortem.’

The van from the Forensic Institute had also arrived. The men were just waiting for a signal to put the body on a stretcher and

take it to Pont d'Austerlitz.

'Go ahead!' Maigret said with a sigh. He looked around for Janvier. 'Shall we go and eat?'

Neither of them was hungry, but they went to a brasserie all the same and ordered onion soup, just because they had decided to do so an hour earlier. Maigret had given instructions for a photograph of the dead girl to be sent to the newspapers so that it might appear in the morning editions if at all possible.

'Are you going over there?' Janvier asked.

Maigret knew he was referring to the Morgue, which was now called the Forensic Institute.

'I think I'll drop by.'

'Dr Paul will be there. I phoned him.'

'How about a calvados?'

'Why not?'

Two women were eating sauerkraut at a nearby table, both hostesses, both in evening dress, and Maigret watched them attentively as if trying to spot the subtle differences between them and the dead girl.

'Are you going home?'

Janvier made up his mind. 'I'll go with you.'

It was 4.30 by the time they got to the Forensic Institute. Dr Paul, who had only just arrived, was putting on his white coat, a cigarette dangling from his lower lip as always when he was about to conduct a post-mortem.

'Have you examined her, doctor?'

'I've had a quick look.'

The body was naked on a marble slab and Maigret turned his eyes away.

'What do you think?'

'I'd say she was between nineteen and twenty-two. She was in good health but I suspect she was malnourished.'

'A nightclub hostess?'

Dr Paul looked at him with wicked little eyes.

'You mean a girl who sleeps with the customers?'

'Something like that.'

'Then the answer is no.'

'How can you be so categorical?'

'Because this girl has never slept with anyone.'

Janvier, who had been mechanically looking at the body under

the spotlight, now blushed and turned his head away.

'Are you sure?'

'Certain.' He put on his rubber gloves and got his instruments ready on an enamelled table. 'Are you staying?'

'We'll go next door. Will you be long?'

'Less than an hour. It depends on what I find. Would you like an analysis of the stomach contents?'

'Preferably. You never know.'

Maigret and Janvier went into an adjoining office, where they sat down, as formally as in a waiting room. Both still had the image of the white young body on their retinas.

'I wonder who she is,' Janvier murmured after a long silence. 'You don't put on an evening gown except to go to the theatre, some kinds of nightclub or a party.'

They must both have had the same idea. Something didn't feel right. There weren't many parties for which evening dress was required, and you wouldn't see a gown as cheap and faded as the one worn by the unknown girl at that kind of party anyway.

On the other hand, after what Dr Paul had said, it was getting harder to imagine the girl working in a Montmartre nightclub.

'A wedding?' Maigret suggested, although he wasn't really convinced.

That was another occasion people dressed up for.

'Do you think so?'

'No.' Maigret sighed as he lit a pipe. 'Let's just wait.'

They had been silent for ten minutes when he said to Janvier:

'Do you mind going and fetching her clothes?'

'Do you really want them?'

Maigret nodded. 'Unless you can't stand it.'

Janvier opened the door, was gone for barely two minutes, and when he returned he was so pale that Maigret thought he was going to vomit. He was holding the blue gown and some white underwear.

'Has Paul nearly finished?'

'I don't know. I preferred not to look.'

'Pass me the gown.'

It had been washed often. He moved the hem aside, revealing that the colour had faded. A label bore the words 'Mademoiselle Irène, 35b Rue de Douai'.

'That's not far from Place Vintimille,' Maigret said.

He examined the stockings – one of the feet was soaking wet – the knickers, the brassiere and a thin suspender belt.

'Is this all she had on her body?'

'Yes. The shoe comes from Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette.'

Local again. If it hadn't been for Dr Paul's assertion, it would have precisely matched what a nightclub hostess or a young woman looking for adventure in Montmartre would have worn.

'Maybe Lognon will discover something?' Janvier suggested.

'I doubt it.'

They were both equally uncomfortable, unable to stop themselves from thinking about what was happening on the other side of the door. Three-quarters of an hour went by before the door opened. When they looked into the next room, the corpse had gone, and an employee was closing one of the metal drawers in which the bodies were kept.

Dr Paul was taking off his coat and lighting a cigarette.

'I didn't find much,' he said. 'Death was caused by a fracture of the skull. There wasn't just one blow, but several, at least three quite violent blows. It's impossible to establish what object was used. It could as easily have been a tool as a brass poker or a candlestick, anything heavy and blunt. She fell to her knees first and tried to grab on to someone. I found some strands of dark wool under the nails. I'll send them to the lab in a while. The fact that it was wool seems to indicate that they were a man's clothes she clutched on to like that.'

'So there was a struggle.'

Dr Paul opened a cupboard, where, along with his white coat, his rubber gloves and various miscellaneous objects, he kept a bottle of liqueur brandy.

'Like a drink?'

Maigret accepted without any false shame. Janvier, seeing this, also nodded.

'What I'm going to add is only a personal opinion. Before being struck with some kind of instrument, she was hit in the face, either punched or slapped. I'd opt for a couple of good slaps. I don't know if that was when she fell to her knees, but I'm inclined to think it was, and that it was then that they decided to finish her off.'

'In other words, she wasn't attacked from behind?'

'Definitely not.'

'So it wasn't some thief who surprised her on a street corner?'

‘In my opinion, no. And there’s nothing to prove it happened outdoors.’

‘Did you learn anything from the stomach contents?’

‘Oh, yes. And from an analysis of the blood, too.’

‘What?’

There was a slight smile on Dr Paul’s lips, a smile that seemed to be saying:

‘Sorry, I’m going to disappoint you.’

He took his time, like when he told one of those anecdotes he specialized in.

‘She was at least three-quarters drunk.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘In my report tomorrow, you’ll find the percentage of alcohol found in her blood. I’ll also send you the results of the complete analysis I’ll be making of the stomach contents. Her last meal was eaten about six to eight hours before she died.’

‘What time did she die?’

‘Around two in the morning. Before two rather than after.’

‘That puts her last meal at six or seven in the evening.’

‘But not her last drink.’

It was unlikely that the body could have lain there on Place Vintimille for a long time before being discovered. Ten minutes? A quarter of an hour? Certainly no longer than that.

Which meant that at least three-quarters of an hour had elapsed between the time of death and the time the body had been dumped on the pavement.

‘Any jewellery?’

Paul went into the adjoining room to fetch it. There was a pair of gold earrings, decorated with very small jewels in the shape of flowers, and a ring, also decorated with a slightly larger ruby. They weren’t fake, but they weren’t of any great value either. Judging by their style, the three items were about thirty years old, maybe more.

‘Is that all? Did you examine her hands?’

One of Dr Paul’s specialities was determining people’s professions from the telltale marks of wear on the hands, which had several times made it possible to identify persons unknown.

‘She probably did a bit of housework, not much. She wasn’t a typist or a seamstress. Three or four years ago, she was operated on for appendicitis by a second-rate surgeon. That’s all I can tell you

right now. Are you going home to bed?'

'I think so, yes,' Maigret murmured.

'Goodnight, then. I'm staying here. You'll get my report about nine in the morning. Another drink?'

Maigret and Janvier found themselves outside again. The barges moored by the quayside were starting to stir into life.

'Can I drop you at home, chief?'

Maigret said yes. They passed Gare de Lyon, where a train had just arrived. The sky was getting paler. It was colder now than during the night. A few windows were lit, and every now and again a man passed on his way to work.

'I don't want to see you in the office before this afternoon.'

'What about you?'

'I'm probably going to bed as well.'

'Goodnight, chief.'

Maigret climbed the stairs noiselessly. As he was trying to insert the key in the lock, the door opened, and Madame Maigret, in her nightdress, switched on the light and looked at him with dazzled eyes.

'You're back late! What time is it?'

Even when she was fast asleep, he could never climb the stairs without her hearing him.

'I don't know. After five.'

'Are you hungry?'

'No.'

'Come to bed soon. A cup of coffee?'

'No, thanks.'

He undressed and slipped into the warm bed. Instead of falling asleep, he kept thinking about the dead girl on Place Vintimille. Outside, he could hear Paris gradually waking up, isolated sounds, some far, some near, infrequent at first then forming a kind of familiar symphony. The concierges were starting to drag the dustbins to the kerb. The footsteps of the dairy maid putting bottles of milk outside the doors echoed on the stairs.

Finally, Madame Maigret got out of bed with infinite care, and he had to make an effort not to smile and give himself away. He heard her in the bathroom, then in the kitchen, where she switched on the gas, and he soon smelled the aroma of coffee wafting through the apartment.

He wasn't deliberately trying not to sleep. Sleep just wouldn't

come, maybe because he was too tired.

His wife jumped when he came into the kitchen in dressing gown and slippers while she was having her breakfast. The light was still on even though it was already day outside.

'Can't you sleep?'

'As you can see.'

'Would you like some breakfast?'

'If there's some going.'

She didn't ask him why he had been out for most of the night. She had noticed that his coat was wet.

'I hope you didn't catch cold.'

When he had drunk his coffee, he picked up the telephone and called the second district.

'Is Inspector Lognon there?'

The nightclubs had long since closed their doors, and Lognon could have gone to bed. But he was at his desk all the same.

'Lognon? Maigret here. Anything to report?'

'Nothing. I visited all the clubs and questioned the taxi-drivers parked outside.'

Because of Dr Paul's words, Maigret had expected this.

'I think you can go home to bed.'

'What about you?'

In Lognon's language, that meant:

'You're sending me to bed so that you can continue the investigation as you see fit. And later they'll say, "That idiot Lognon didn't find a thing!" '

Maigret thought of Madame Lognon, thin and mournful, prevented by her disabilities from leaving the apartment on Place Constantin-Pecqueur. Whenever the inspector got home, it was only to hear her moaning and complaining, and to have to do the housework and shopping.

'Are you sure you cleaned under the sideboard?'

He felt sorry for Inspector Hard-Done-By.

'I have one small lead. I'm not sure if it'll get us anywhere.'

Lognon was silent at the other end of the line.

'If you really don't want to sleep, I'll pick you up in an hour or two.'

'I'll be at the station.'

Maigret telephoned Quai des Orfèvres and asked for a car to be sent to him, stopping first at the Forensic Institute to pick up the

girl's clothes.

It wasn't until he got into his bath that he almost fell asleep, and for a moment he was tempted to phone Lognon and tell him to go and see Mademoiselle Irène in Rue de Douai without him.

It had stopped raining. The sky was white, with a certain yellowish glow that raised hopes that the sun would come out some time during the day.

'Will you be back for lunch?'

'Probably. I don't know.'

'I thought your investigation was supposed to be over last night.'

'It is over. This is another one.'

He waited until he saw the little car from the Police Judiciaire pull up at the kerb. The driver hooted his horn three times. Maigret signalled to him through the window that he was coming.

'See you soon.'

Ten minutes later, as the car was driving along Faubourg Montmartre, he had already forgotten that he hadn't slept all night.

'Stop somewhere so that we can have a glass of white wine!' he said.

2.

In which Inspector Hard-Done-By meets an old acquaintance, and Lapointe is entrusted with an unusual task

Inspector Lognon was waiting by the kerb in Rue de La Rochefoucauld, and even from a distance it looked as if his shoulders were stooped beneath the burden of fate. He invariably wore mouse-grey suits that were never ironed, and his coat was grey, too, his hat an ugly brown. It wasn't because he had been up all night that his complexion this morning was bilious and that he seemed to have a head cold. This was the way he looked every day, and he was probably just as distressing a sight as soon as he got out of bed.

Maigret had said on the phone that he would pick him up but hadn't asked him to wait outside. Lognon was deliberately standing at the kerb as if he had been there for hours. Not only was his case being stolen from him, but he was being made to waste his time and, after a sleepless night, he was being forced to hang about in the street.

As he opened the car door for him, Maigret glanced at the front of the police station, its faded flag hanging in the still air: it was in that building that he had started his career, not as an inspector, but as the secretary to the local chief.

Lognon sat down in silence, avoiding asking where he was being taken. The driver, who had his instructions, turned left and headed for Rue de Douai.

It was always awkward to talk to Lognon because, whatever you said, he always somehow made it seem as if he was being humiliated.

'Have you read the newspaper?'

'I haven't had time.'

Maigret, who had just bought it, took it from his pocket. The photograph of the unknown girl appeared on the front page, just the head, with the bruises on her eye and lip. Nevertheless, she ought to be recognizable.

'I hope they're starting to get a few phone calls at headquarters by now,' Maigret went on.

Lognon was probably thinking: 'In other words, I've been up all night for nothing, going from one nightclub to another, one taxi-driver to another. All *you* have to do is put a photograph in a newspaper and wait for the phone calls to come in!'

He didn't laugh. It was hard to explain. His face had assumed a glum, resigned expression, as if he had decided to be a living reproach to the cruelty and unfairness of mankind.

He didn't ask any questions. He was merely a humble cog in the police machine, and you don't explain anything to a cog.

Rue de Douai was deserted. Only one concierge was in her doorway. The car stopped outside a mauve-painted shop above which could be read in copperplate, 'Mademoiselle Irène' and below it, in smaller lettering, 'High Fashion'.

In the dusty window, there were only two dresses, a white gown with sequins and a more casual black silk dress. Maigret got out, motioned to Lognon to follow him, asked the driver to wait and grabbed the brown paper package he had been given by the Forensic Institute.

When he tried to open the door, he saw that it was closed and that the handle had been removed. It was after 9.30. Maigret looked through the window and glimpsed light in a room beyond the shop. He started knocking.

Several minutes went by, as if there was nobody inside to hear the noise he was making. Beside him, Lognon waited without moving, without saying a word. He wasn't smoking: he had stopped smoking years before, when his wife, in the early stages of her illness, had claimed that smoke made her choke.

A figure at last appeared from the door at the back. A girl, quite young, in a red dressing gown that she held folded over her chest,

looked at the two of them. She disappeared, no doubt to go and talk to someone, came back, crossed the shop, which was crammed full of dresses and coats, and at last made up her mind to open the door.

'What is it?' she asked, looking suspiciously at Maigret, then at Lognon, then at the package.

'Mademoiselle Irène?'

'I'm not her.'

'Is she here?'

'The shop isn't open.'

'I'd like to talk to Mademoiselle Irène.'

'Who shall I say?'

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, Police Judiciaire.'

She didn't appear either surprised or frightened. From close up, it was clear that she was no older than eighteen. Either she hadn't yet woken up properly, or apathy was her natural state.

'I'll go and see,' she said, walking back to the other room.

They heard her talking in a low voice to someone. Then there were noises as if this someone was getting out of bed. It took Mademoiselle Irène two or three minutes to comb her hair and put on a dressing gown.

She was a woman of a certain age, with a pale face, big blue eyes and sparse blonde hair verging on white close to the roots. She put her head round the door to look at them, and when she at last approached she was holding a cup of coffee in her hand.

It wasn't Maigret she addressed, but Lognon:

'You again. What do you want this time?'

'I don't know. The inspector wants to talk to you.'

'Mademoiselle Irène?' Maigret asked.

'Is it my real name you're after? If it is, I was born Coumar, Élisabeth Coumar. Irène sounds better for my business.'

Maigret, who had approached the counter, unwrapped his package and took out the blue gown.

'Do you recognize this gown?'

She didn't take a step to get a closer look at it, but said without hesitation:

'Of course.'

'When did you sell it?'

'I didn't sell it.'

'But it is from this shop?'

She didn't invite them to sit down, didn't seem either upset or

worried. ‘What of it?’

‘When did you last see it?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘It may matter a lot.’

‘Last night.’

‘At what time?’

‘Just after nine.’

‘Your shop’s still open at nine in the evening?’

‘I never close before ten. Almost every day, women come in to buy something at the last moment.’

Lognon presumably knew all this, but had assumed a neutral air, as if none of it was any of his business.

‘I assume your customers are mostly hostesses and cabaret performers?’

‘Among other things. Some get up at eight in the evening and they’re always missing something to put on, stockings, a belt, a brassiere, or else they notice their dress was torn the night before …’

‘You said just now that you didn’t sell this gown.’

She turned to the girl, who was standing in the doorway of the other room.

‘Viviane! Get me another cup of coffee.’

The girl hastened to get her cup with the zeal of a slave.

‘Is she your maid?’ Maigret asked, watching her as she left the room.

‘No. I’ve taken her under my wing. She also turned up one evening, just like that, and stayed.’

She didn’t bother to explain. Once again, Lognon, at whom she occasionally glanced, must have known all about it.

‘Getting back to last night,’ Maigret said.

‘She came—’

‘Hold on a moment. Did you know her?’

‘I’d seen her once before.’

‘When was that?’

‘Maybe a month ago.’

‘She’d already bought a dress from you?’

‘No. She’d hired one.’

‘You hire out clothes?’

‘Yes, sometimes.’

‘Had she given you her name and address?’

‘I think so. I must have written it on a piece of paper. If you want me to look for it …’

‘Later. The first time, was it an evening gown?’

‘Yes. The same one.’

‘Had she come late that time, too?’

‘No. Just after dinner, about eight. She needed an evening gown and she admitted she couldn’t afford to buy one. She asked me if it was true that I hired them out.’

‘Did she seem different from your other customers?’

‘They always start out different. After a few months, they all end up the same.’

‘Did you find a gown in her size?’

‘The blue one you’re holding. It’s a size 40. It’s spent the night on the backs of I don’t know how many local girls.’

‘Did she take it away with her?’

‘The first time, yes.’

‘And she brought it back the following morning?’

‘The next day at midday. I was surprised she turned up so early. Usually, they sleep all day.’

‘Did she pay for the hire?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you didn’t see her again until last night?’

‘I already told you. It was just after nine when she came in and asked me if I still had the gown. I said I did. Then she told me that this time she couldn’t pay the deposit, but that if I didn’t mind she’d leave me the clothes she was wearing.’

‘She changed here?’

‘Yes. She also needed shoes and a coat. I found her a velvet cape, which did quite nicely.’

‘How did she seem to you?’

‘Like someone who’s desperate for an evening gown and a coat.’

‘In other words, it mattered a lot to her.’

‘It always matters a lot to them.’

‘Did you have the impression she was meeting someone?’

She shrugged and sipped at the coffee Viviane had just brought her.

‘Did your girl see her?’

‘She was the one who helped her get dressed.’

‘Did she say anything particular to you, mademoiselle?’

Her employer answered for her. ‘Viviane doesn’t listen to what

people say to her. She couldn't care less.'

The girl did indeed seem to be living in an immaterial world. Her eyes expressed nothing. She moved about without stirring the air and, next to the bulk of Mademoiselle Irène, she really did seem like a slave, or rather a dog.

'I found her some shoes and stockings and a silver handbag. Has something happened to her?'

'Haven't you read the newspapers?'

'I was still in bed when you knocked at the door. Viviane was busy making my coffee.'

Maigret handed her the paper, and she looked at the photograph without showing any surprise.

'Is that her?'

'Yes.'

'You don't seem surprised.'

'It's been a long time since anything surprised me. Is the dress ruined?'

'It got wet in the rain but it isn't torn.'

'That's something at least. I suppose you want me to hand over her clothes? Viviane!'

Viviane had understood. She opened one of the wardrobes, where dresses were hanging. She placed a black woollen dress on the counter, and Maigret immediately searched for a label.

'She made that one herself,' Mademoiselle Irène said. 'Bring her coat, Viviane.'

The coat, also woollen, was of poor quality, beige with a brown check pattern, and came from a department store in Rue La Fayette.

'Cheap, as you can see. The shoes aren't much better. Or the slip.'

It was all placed on the counter. Then the slave brought a black leather handbag with a white metal clasp. Apart from a pencil and a pair of worn gloves, it was empty.

'You say you lent her a handbag?'

'Yes. She wanted to use her own. I pointed out that it didn't go with the dress and I found her a little silver evening bag. She put her lipstick, her powder and her handkerchief in it.'

'No purse?'

'Maybe. I didn't notice.'

Lognon still had the air of someone listening in on a conversation he hasn't been invited to join.

'What time was it when she left here?'

‘It took her about a quarter of an hour to get dressed.’

‘Was she in a hurry?’

‘She seemed to be. She checked the time more than once.’

‘On her watch?’

‘I didn’t see any watch on her. There’s a clock over the counter.’

‘When she left, it was raining. Did she take a taxi?’

‘There were no taxis in the street. She set off in the direction of Place Blanche.’

‘Did she give you her name and address again?’

‘I didn’t ask her.’

‘Would you mind trying to find the piece of paper where you noted them down the first time?’

With a sigh, she went behind the counter and opened a drawer in which there was all sorts of junk: notebooks, invoices, pencils, fabric samples and a whole variety of buttons.

‘You know,’ she said as she searched desultorily through the drawer, ‘there’s no point keeping their addresses, because they usually live in rented rooms, and they change them more often than they change their slips. When they don’t have enough to pay their rent, they disappear and … No, this isn’t it! If I remember rightly, it was somewhere local. A street everyone knows. Sorry, I can’t find it. If you really want it, I’ll keep looking and call you …’

‘Please do.’

‘Does he work with you?’ she asked, indicating Lognon. ‘He can tell you some stories about me! But he’ll also tell you I’ve been straight for years. Isn’t that true?’

Maigret helped himself to brown paper to take the clothes away in.

‘Aren’t you going to leave me the blue gown?’

‘Not now. You’ll get it back later.’

‘Whatever you say.’

Just as he was leaving, Maigret thought of another question. ‘When she came last night, did she ask for a gown or the gown she’d already worn once before?’

‘The one she’d worn before.’

‘Do you think she would have taken another if you hadn’t had it?’

‘I don’t know. She asked if I still had that one.’

‘Thank you for your help.’

‘Don’t mention it.’

They got back in the car, and the slave closed the door behind

them. Lognon was still not saying anything, waiting for questions.

'Has she been in prison?'

'Three or four times.'

'Receiving stolen goods?'

'Yes.'

'When was the last time?'

'Four or five years ago. She started out as a dancer, then assistant madam in a brothel in the days when they still existed.'

'Has she always had a slave?'

The driver was waiting to be told where to go.

'Are you going home, Lognon?'

'If you have no urgent orders to give me.'

'Place Constantin-Pecqueur,' Maigret said.

'I can walk.'

Damn it, why did he always have to have that humble, resigned air?

'Do you know Viviane?'

'Not that one. They change from time to time.'

'Does she throw them out?'

'No. The girls leave when they want to. She takes them in when they're broke and have nowhere to sleep.'

'Why?'

'Maybe because she doesn't want to leave them on the streets.'

Lognon seemed to be saying: 'I know you don't believe it, that you suspect God knows what ulterior motives. But a woman like that can sometimes feel pity and do something purely out of charity. I'm the same, everyone thinks I'm …'

Maigret sighed. 'I really think you should get some rest, Lognon. I'll probably need you tonight. What do you think of this case?'

The inspector didn't reply, merely shrugged his shoulders. What was the point in pretending to believe he had thoughts of his own when everyone, he was convinced of it, took him for an idiot?

It was a pity. Not only was he intelligent, but he was one of the most conscientious men on the Paris force.

They stopped on the little square, outside an apartment block.

'Will you call me at the office?'

'No. At home. I'd prefer you to wait at home.'

Half an hour later, Maigret got to Quai des Orfèvres with his package under his arm and walked into the inspectors' office.

'Anything for me, Lucas?'

‘Nothing, chief.’

He frowned, surprised and disappointed. It had been hours now since the photograph had appeared in the newspapers.

‘No phone calls?’

‘Only about some cheese that was stolen from Les Halles.’

‘I meant the girl who was killed last night.’

‘Not a thing.’

Dr Paul’s report was on his desk, and he merely glanced at it, noting that it added nothing to what the doctor had told him the previous night.

‘Can you send in Lapointe?’

While waiting, he looked in turn at the clothes he had spread over an armchair and at the photograph of the dead girl.

‘Good morning, chief. Do you have something for me?’

He showed him the photograph, the dress and the underwear. ‘First of all, I want you to take all these things upstairs to Moers and ask him to give them the usual treatment.’

In other words, Moers would place the clothes in a paper bag and shake them until the dust fell off. He would then examine the dust with a microscope and analyse it. That sometimes yielded results.

‘I want him to give the same attention to the handbag, the shoes and the evening gown. Got that?’

‘Yes. Do we still not know who she is?’

‘We don’t know anything, except that last night she borrowed this blue gown for one night from a shop in Montmartre. When Moers has finished with it, go to the Forensic Institute and take a good look at the body.’

Young Lapointe, who had only been in the job for two years, grimaced.

‘This is important. Then I want you to go to a model agency, it doesn’t matter which. There’s one in Rue Saint-Florentin. You need to find a young woman who’s about the same size and weight as the dead girl. Size 40.’

For a moment, Lapointe wondered if Maigret was serious or just teasing him.

‘What then?’ he asked.

‘Make her try on the dresses. If they fit her, bring her here, take her upstairs and ask them to photograph her.’

Lapointe was starting to understand.

‘That’s not all. I want a photograph of the dead girl, too, with

make-up and everything, a photograph that makes it look as if she's alive.'

In Criminal Records, they had a photographer who was a real specialist in this kind of work.

'Then they need to combine the two photographs, so that we have the dead girl's head on the model's body. Be quick about it. I'd like it in time for the last edition of the evening papers.'

Alone now in his office, Maigret signed a few papers that needed dispatching, filled a pipe, called Lucas and asked him to find the file on Élisabeth Coumar, known as Irène, just in case. He was convinced it wouldn't lead to anything, that she had told the truth, but so far she was the only person to have identified the girl found dead on Place Vintimille.

The more time passed, the more surprised he was not to have received any telephone calls.

If the girl had lived in Paris, there were a number of possibilities. Firstly, that she lived with her parents, in which case they would have rushed to the nearest police station or come straight to Quai des Orfèvres as soon as they saw her photograph in the newspapers.

If she had her own apartment, she had neighbours, a concierge and probably did her shopping locally.

Did she live with a girlfriend, as was often the case? That meant one more person to worry about her disappearance and recognize her picture.

She might also have been staying in a hostel for students or for young women who work – there were several such hostels – which meant even more people who knew her.

The final possibility was a furnished room in one of the thousands of little hotels in Paris.

Maigret rang the inspectors' office.

'Is Torrence there? If he's not busy, tell him to come and see me.'

If she lived with her parents, all they could do was wait. The same thing if she had an apartment in a private house, alone or with a friend. But in the other cases, it was possible to speed things up.

'Sit down, Torrence. You see this photograph? Don't worry, we'll have a better one later this afternoon. Imagine this girl wearing a black dress and a beige check coat. That's how people are used to seeing her.'

Just then, a beam of sunlight slid in through the window and

drew a bright line on the desk. Maigret broke off for a moment to greet it, as surprised as someone looking at a bird coming to rest on a window-sill.

'First, go down to the Hotel Agency and ask them to show this photograph around the cheap hotels. Best to start with the ninth and eighteenth arrondissements. You know what I mean?'

'Yes. Do you know her name?'

'We don't know anything. What you can do is draw up a list of hostels for young women and start doing the rounds. It probably won't yield any results, but I don't want to rule anything out.'

'Got it.'

'That's all. Take a car to make things quicker.'

It had suddenly got warmer, and he went and opened the window, fiddled with a few more papers on his desk, looked at the time and decided to go home to bed.

'Wake me up about four,' he told his wife.

'If it's necessary.'

It wasn't necessary. Basically, it was only a question of waiting. He fell almost immediately into a heavy sleep, and when his wife approached the bed, a cup of coffee in her hand, he looked at her as if surprised to be here, with sunlight filling the room.

'It's four o'clock. You told me—'

'Yes. Any phone calls?'

'Only the plumber to say …'

The first editions of the afternoon papers had come out about one o'clock. They all featured the same photograph as the morning ones.

Even though the dead girl had been slightly disfigured, Mademoiselle Irène had nevertheless recognized her immediately, despite the fact that she had only seen her twice.

The possibility remained that the girl wasn't from Paris, wasn't staying in a hotel, and that on the two occasions she'd come to Rue de Douai she'd only arrived a few hours earlier.

That wasn't very likely, though, given that the clothes she wore, apart from the dress she had made herself, had been bought from shops in Rue La Fayette.

'Will you be back for dinner?'

'Maybe.'

'If you have to stay out this evening, take your big overcoat anyway, it'll be cold after dark.'

When he entered his office, there was no message on his desk blotter, which upset him. He called Lucas.

'Still nothing? No telephone calls?'

'Still nothing, chief. I brought you the file on Élisabeth Coumar.'

Standing, he leafed through it without finding anything other than what Lognon had told him.

'Lapointe sent the photographs to the newspapers.'

'Is he here?'

'He's waiting for you.'

'Send him in.'

The pasted-together photographs were such masterpieces, Maigret got a shock from them. There, suddenly, before his very eyes, was the image of the girl, not as he had seen her in the rain, on Place Vintimille, by the light of torches, nor as he had glimpsed her later on a marble slab at the Forensic Institute, but as she must have looked the previous evening when she had shown up at Mademoiselle Irène's shop.

Lapointe seemed equally troubled. 'What do you think, chief?' he said hesitantly, adding after a pause, 'Pretty, isn't she?'

It wasn't the word he was looking for, or the one that corresponded to reality. The girl was certainly pretty, but there was something more, something hard to define. The photographer had even managed to bring her eyes to life, eyes that seemed to be asking an unanswerable question.

In two of the prints, she was wearing only her black dress; in another, she had on her brown check coat; in the last one, finally, she was in evening dress. You could imagine her on the streets of Paris, where there were so many girls like her, dodging in and out of the crowds, stopping every now and again to look at shop windows, then continuing on their way to God knows where.

She had had a mother and a father, friends at school, people who had known her later, men and women. She had talked to them. They had called her by her name.

But now that she was dead, nobody appeared to remember her, nobody was getting worried. It was as if she had never existed.

'I hope it wasn't too difficult.'

'What?'

'Finding a model.'

'Only embarrassing. I was surrounded by a dozen of them, and when I showed them the dresses, they all wanted to try them on.'

‘In front of you?’

‘They’re used to it.’

After two years in the Police Judiciaire, Lapointe could still blush!

‘Have the photographs sent to the provincial flying squads.’

‘I already thought of that. I took the liberty of sending them without waiting for your instructions.’

‘Perfect. Have you sent them to all the police stations in Paris, too?’

‘They went off half an hour ago.’

‘Get me Lognon on the phone.’

‘At the second district?’

‘No. At home.’

A few moments later, a voice said into the phone, ‘Inspector Lognon speaking.’

‘Maigret here.’

‘I know.’

‘I’ve had some photographs sent to your office, the same ones that’ll appear in the newspapers in an hour or two.’

‘Do you want me to do the rounds again?’

Maigret would have been hard put to say why he didn’t think it would lead anywhere. The visit to Mademoiselle Irène, the origin of the evening gown, the time the murder had been committed, the place: everything seemed to indicate a connection with the neighbourhood where the nightclubs were.

Why, at nine in the evening, had the girl felt the need to get hold of an evening gown, unless it was necessary for her to go to a place where people dress up?

It was too late to go to the theatre, and, apart from the opera or a first night, you don’t absolutely have to wear evening dress there.

‘Try, just in case. Check especially those taxi-drivers who work nights.’

Maigret hung up. Lapointe was still there, awaiting instructions, and Maigret didn’t know what instructions to give him.

Just in case, he called the shop in Rue de Douai, too.

‘Mademoiselle Irène?’

‘Speaking.’

‘Did you find that address?’

‘Oh, it’s you … No! I’ve looked everywhere. I must have thrown the paper away or used it to write down a customer’s

measurements. But I've remembered her first name. I'm almost sure of it. It's Louise. The surname also starts with an *L*. La something … Like La Montagne or La Bruyère … Not that, but something like it …'

'When she transferred the objects from her own bag to the silver bag, did you notice if there was an identity card?'

'No.'

'Keys?'

'Wait! I think I can see keys. Not keys. Just one little brass key.'

He heard her calling:

'Viviane, come here a moment!'

He didn't hear what she said to her slave.

'Viviane also thinks she saw a key,' she confirmed.

'A flat key?'

'Yes, you know, like most of the ones they make nowadays.'

'Was there any money?'

'A few folded banknotes. I remember that, too. Not much. Maybe two or three hundred-franc notes. I remember thinking she wouldn't get far with that.'

'Anything else?'

'No. I think that's everything.'

There was a knock at the door. It was Janvier, who had just arrived. On seeing the prints on the desk, he had the same shock as Maigret.

'You found some photographs of her?' he said in surprise.

He frowned and took a closer look.

'Did they do them upstairs?'

Finally, he murmured:

'Strange girl, isn't she?'

They still didn't know anything about her, except that nobody, apart from a woman who hired out dresses, seemed to know her.

'What do we do?'

All Maigret could do was shrug and say:

'We wait!'

3.

The maid who is unused to the telephone and the old lady in Rue de Clichy

Somewhat glum and disappointed, Maigret had stayed at headquarters until seven in the evening and then had taken the bus home to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. There was a newspaper, unfolded, on the pedestal table, with the photograph of the dead girl on the front page, and the accompanying article probably said that Detective Chief Inspector Maigret was in charge of the case.

But his wife didn't ask him any questions. Nor did she try to distract him. After a while, as they were eating together and had almost got to the dessert, he happened to look at her and was surprised to find her as anxious as he was.

He didn't wonder if she was thinking about the same thing. Later, he went and sat down in his armchair, lit his pipe and looked through the paper while Madame Maigret cleared the table and washed up. It was only when she sat down facing him, the basket of socks and stockings on her knees, that he looked at her two or three times, surreptitiously, and finally murmured, as if it was something of no great importance:

'I wonder what would make a girl feel the urgent need to wear an evening gown.'

Why was he sure she had been thinking about this the whole time? He could even have sworn, from her little sigh of satisfaction, that she had been waiting for him to ask her about it.

‘It may not be necessary to look too far,’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, a man would probably never think of putting on a dinner jacket or tails without a specific reason. But it’s different for a girl. When I was thirteen, I worked for hours and hours, on the sly, fixing up an old evening gown my mother had thrown away.’

He looked at her in surprise, as if suddenly discovering an unknown side of his wife’s character.

‘Sometimes, at night, when they thought I was asleep, I’d get up and put on that gown and look at myself in the mirror. And once, when my parents had gone out, I put it on, along with my mother’s shoes, which were too big for me, and walked as far as the corner of the street.’

He was silent for more than a minute, not even noticing that she was blushing at the secret she had told him.

‘You were thirteen,’ he said at last.

‘One of my aunts, Aunt Cécile, who you never met, though I’ve often talked about her, the one who was rich for a few years and whose husband was ruined overnight, often shut herself up in her room and spent hours doing her hair and getting dressed as if she was going to the opera. If you knocked at her door, she’d reply that she had a migraine. One day, I looked through the keyhole and discovered the truth. She was looking at herself in the mirror, fanning herself and smiling.’

‘That was a long time ago.’

‘Do you think women have changed?’

‘You’d need a more serious reason than that to knock on Mademoiselle Irène’s door at nine o’clock in the evening and ask for an evening gown when you only have two or three hundred francs in your pocket, then put it on right away and walk off in the rain.’

‘What I mean is that it isn’t necessarily a reason a man would find serious.’

He understood what she meant but wasn’t convinced.

‘Are you tired?’

He nodded. They went to bed early. In the morning, it was windy, and the sky threatened rain. Madame Maigret made him take his umbrella. At Quai des Orfèvres, he almost missed the call, because he was already at the door, just about to leave the office to attend the daily briefing, when the telephone rang. He retraced his steps.

‘Hello. Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.’

‘Someone who won’t give her name is asking to speak to you personally,’ the switchboard operator said.

‘Put her through.’

As soon as the connection was made, he heard a piercing voice, so shrill that it made the receiver vibrate, the voice of someone who wasn’t used to the telephone.

‘Is that Detective Chief Inspector Maigret?’

‘Yes, it is. Who is this?’

There was a silence.

‘Hello? I’m listening.’

‘I can tell you something about the girl who was killed.’

‘The one who was found on Place Vintimille?’

Another silence. He wondered if the person calling was a child.

‘Go on. Do you know her?’

‘Yes. I know where she lived.’

He was convinced that it wasn’t because she was hesitating that she left these long pauses between her sentences, but because the telephone overawed her. She shouted instead of speaking, holding her mouth too close to the receiver. A radio somewhere was playing music. He could make out the crying of a baby.

‘Where’s that?’

‘113A Rue de Clichy.’

‘Who are you?’

‘If you want information, just ask the old lady on the second floor. Madame Crêmieux, her name is.’

He heard a second voice crying:

‘Rose! Rose! What are you—’

Then, almost immediately, the person hung up.

He only spent a few minutes in the commissioner’s office and, as Janvier had just arrived, he took him with him.

Janvier had scoured Paris in vain the previous evening. As for Lognon, who had been dealing with the nightclubs and the taxi-drivers, he hadn’t yet been in touch.

‘She sounds like a young maid who’s just arrived from the country,’ Maigret said to Janvier. ‘She has an accent, but I can’t place it.’

113A Rue de Clichy was a well-to-do apartment building, like most buildings in the neighbourhood. The two men first stopped to see the concierge, a woman in her forties, who watched them

suspiciously as they walked in.

'Police Judiciaire,' Maigret announced, showing his badge.

'What do you want?'

'Do you have a tenant named Madame Crêmieux?'

'Second floor on the left.'

'Is she in?'

'Unless she's gone shopping. I didn't see her go past.'

'Does she live alone?'

The concierge didn't seem to have an entirely easy conscience. 'Alone and not alone.'

'What do you mean?'

'Every now and again, she has someone with her.'

'A family member?'

'No. Well, I don't see why I should make a big mystery out of it. She can look after herself. She sometimes takes a lodger.'

'Just for short periods?'

'She'd prefer to have someone who'd stay, of course, but, with her character, she soon drives them away. I think the last one was the fifth or sixth.'

'Why didn't you say that from the start?'

'Because, the first time she had someone, a girl who was an assistant at the Galeries, she asked me to say she was her niece.'

'And she gave you a cut?'

She shrugged. 'First of all, the owner doesn't allow his tenants to sub-let. Then, when you let a furnished room, you have to declare it to the police and fill out forms. And finally, I don't think she declares that income to the tax people.'

'Is that why you didn't get in touch with us?'

She knew what he was referring to. There was even a newspaper from the day before lying on a chair, with the photograph of the unknown girl clearly visible.

'Do you know her?'

'She was the last one.'

'The last what?'

'The last lodger. The last niece, to use the old lady's word.'

'When did you see her last?'

'I don't know. I didn't pay any attention.'

'Do you know her name?'

'Madame Crêmieux called her Louise. As no mail came for her while she lived here, I don't know her surname. I told you, I wasn't

supposed to know she was a lodger. People are allowed to have relatives staying with them. And now, because of that, I might lose my job. I suppose it'll be in the newspapers?'

'It's possible. What kind of person was she?'

'The girl? Nothing special. She'd nod when she passed the lodge if she thought of it, but she never troubled herself to say a word to me.'

'Had she been here long?'

Janvier was taking notes, which had an effect on the concierge, making her think carefully before answering each question.

'If I remember rightly, she arrived just before the New Year.'

'Did she have any luggage?'

'Just a little blue suitcase.'

'How did she come to know Madame Crêmieux?'

'I should have suspected it would end badly. This is the first time anybody's ever got round me like that, but I swear to you that, whatever happens, it's the last. Madame Crêmieux was already living in the building when her husband was alive. He was assistant manager in a bank. Actually, they were here before I arrived.'

'When did he die?'

'Five or six years ago. They didn't have any children. She started complaining, saying how awful it was to live alone in a big apartment. Then she talked about money, how her pension stayed the same even though the cost of living kept going up.'

'Is she rich?'

'She must have means. One day, she told me she owned two buildings somewhere in the tenth arrondissement. The first time she had a lodger, she told me it was a relative from the provinces, but I soon guessed the truth and went to see her. That was when she offered to give me a quarter of the rent she received, and I was stupid enough to accept. It's true that her apartment's too big for just one person.'

'Did she put ads in the newspapers?'

'Yes. With no address, though, just the telephone number.'

'What kind of background did her lodgers have?'

'Hard to say. Good backgrounds, almost always. They were young girls who worked and who were pleased to have a larger room than they'd find in a small hotel, and for the same price, or even for less. Just once, she had a girl who seemed as respectable as the others but would get up at night and let men in. That didn't last more than

a couple of days.'

'Tell me about the last one.'

'What do you want to know?'

'Everything.'

The concierge looked mechanically at the photograph in the newspaper. 'I told you, I only ever saw her pass by. She'd leave in the morning about nine o'clock or half past.'

'Do you know where she worked?'

'No.'

'Did she come back for lunch?'

'Madame Crêmieux didn't allow them to cook in the apartment.'

'What time would she get back?'

'In the evening. Sometimes at seven, sometimes ten or eleven.'

'Did she go out a lot? Did friends come asking for her?'

'Nobody ever came asking for her.'

'Did you ever see her in evening dress?'

She shook her head. 'You know, she was a girl like so many others, and I hardly paid any attention to her. Especially as I didn't think she'd last.'

'Why not?'

'I told you. The old woman's happy enough to let the room, but she doesn't like being disturbed. She's in the habit of going to bed at half past ten, and if her lodger has the misfortune to come back later, she makes a scene. When it comes down to it, it's not so much a lodger she's looking for as someone to keep her company and play cards with her.'

She didn't know why Maigret smiled at this. He had just thought of the dress merchant in Rue de Douai. Élisabeth Coumar picked up girls who were drifting, perhaps out of the goodness of her heart, but perhaps also not to be alone, and since they owed her everything, for a shorter or longer period of time they became slaves of a kind.

Madame Crêmieux took in lodgers. Basically, that boiled down to the same thing. How many old ladies, or old maids, were there in Paris who tried in this way to make sure they had company, preferably the company of someone young and carefree?

'If only I could give back the small amount of money it brought me and avoid losing my job …'

'To sum up, you don't know who she was, where she came from, what she did, or who she saw?'

‘No.’

‘And you didn’t like her?’

‘I don’t like people who don’t have any more money than I have but think they’re superior.’

‘So you think she was poor?’

‘I always saw her in the same dress and coat.’

‘Are there any maids in the building?’

‘Why do you ask me that? There are three of them. The tenants on the first floor have one, so does the tenant on the second floor on the right. Then there’s—’

‘Is one of them young and not long arrived from the country?’

‘You must mean Rose.’

‘Which one is that?’

‘The one on the second floor. The Larchers already had two children. Madame Larcher gave birth again two months ago, and as she couldn’t manage she had a maid fetched from Normandy.’

‘Do the Larchers have a telephone?’

‘Yes. The husband has a good position in an insurance company. They recently bought a car.’

‘Thank you.’

‘If only there was a way to stop the landlord finding out …’

‘One more question. Yesterday, when the photograph of the girl appeared in the newspaper, did you recognize her?’

She hesitated. ‘I wasn’t sure,’ she lied. ‘The first photograph they published, you know …’

‘Did Madame Crêmieux come and see you?’

She blushed. ‘She came in on her way back from shopping. She told me the police were paid well enough for people not to try to do their jobs for them. I saw what she meant. But ever since I saw the second photograph, this one, I’ve been thinking about calling you. Anyway, all things considered, I’m pleased you came. It’s taken quite a weight off my shoulders.’

There was a lift. Maigret and Janvier took it to the second floor. Behind the door on the right, the voices of children could be heard, then another voice, which Maigret recognized, crying:

‘Jean-Paul! Jean-Paul! Will you leave your little sister alone!’

It was at the door on the left that he rang the bell. There were light, furtive steps inside. Someone asked through the door:

‘Who is it?’

‘Madame Crêmieux?’

‘What do you want?’

‘Police.’

Quite a long silence, and finally a murmur:

‘One moment …’

She moved away, doubtless to tidy herself up a bit. When she returned to the door, the noise of her steps was no longer the same: she must have swapped her slippers for shoes. She opened reluctantly and looked at the two of them with sharp little eyes.

‘Please come in. I haven’t finished my housework.’

All the same, she was wearing a fairly smart black dress, and her hair was neatly done. She was between sixty-five and seventy, short, thin and surprisingly vigorous for her age.

‘Do you have any identification?’

Maigret showed her his badge, which she examined attentively.

‘So you’re Inspector Maigret?’

She led them into a living room, which was very large but so cluttered with furniture and knick-knacks that there was barely room to move.

‘Please sit down. What can I do for you?’

She herself sat down, her manner quite dignified, although she was unable to stop her fingers from tensing nervously.

‘It’s about your lodger.’

‘I don’t have a lodger. I do sometimes take someone in and offer them accommodation.’

‘We know all about it, Madame Crêmieux.’

She did not lose her composure but threw Maigret a searching look.

‘About what?’

‘About everything. We don’t belong to the Ministry of Finance, and how you declare your income is no concern of ours.’

There was no newspaper in the room. Maigret took one of the photographs of the unknown girl from his pocket.

‘Do you recognize her?’

‘She stayed with me for a few days.’

‘A few days?’

‘Let’s say a few weeks.’

‘Or shall we say two and a half months?’

‘It’s possible. At my age, time matters so little! You can’t imagine how quickly the days go by.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Louise Laboine.’

‘Is that the name on her identity card?’

‘I never saw her identity card. It’s the name she gave me when she first arrived.’

‘And you don’t know if it’s her real name?’

‘I had no reason to suppose it wasn’t.’

‘Did she read your ad?’

‘Has the concierge talked to you?’

‘It doesn’t matter, Madame Crêmieux. Let’s not waste time. And please let me ask the questions.’

In her dignified manner, she said:

‘All right, go ahead.’

‘Did Louise Laboine answer your ad?’

‘She phoned me to ask the price. I told her. She wanted to know if I couldn’t make it a little cheaper, and I advised her to come and see me.’

‘Did you agree to a reduction?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I always get taken in.’

‘In what way?’

‘When they come here, they all seem very respectable, they’re humble and considerate. I asked her if she went out a lot in the evening, and she said no.’

‘Do you know where she worked?’

‘In an office, apparently, but I don’t know where. It was only after a few days that I realized the kind of girl she was.’

‘What kind is that?’

‘A withdrawn girl who, when she’d made up her mind to say nothing …’

‘So you don’t know anything about her? She didn’t talk to you?’

‘As little as possible. She must have thought she was in a hotel. In the morning, she’d dress and go out. She’d mutter hello if she saw me.’

‘Did she always leave at the same time?’

‘Actually, that’s what surprised me. The first two or three days, she left the house at eight thirty, and I assumed she began work at nine. Then, several times in a row, she didn’t leave until nine fifteen, and I asked her if she’d changed jobs.’

‘What did she reply?’

‘She didn’t. That was her style. When she was embarrassed, she pretended not to hear. In the evening, she’d try to avoid me.’

‘But she must have had to come through the living room in order to get to her bedroom?’

‘Yes. This is where I spend most of my time. I’d invite her to sit down and have a cup of coffee or herbal tea with me. Just once, she condescended to keep me company, and I’m sure she didn’t say five sentences in an hour.’

‘What did you talk about?’

‘Everything. I was trying to find out.’

‘Find out what?’

‘Who she was, where she came from, where she’d lived before.’

‘Did you manage to get anything out of her?’

‘All I know is that she’s familiar with the South. I mentioned Nice, where my husband and I used to spend two weeks every year, and I could see she’d been there, too. When I asked her about her father and mother, she put on this vacant look. If you’d seen her when she had that look, it would have driven you mad, too.’

‘Where did she have her meals?’

‘She ate out, supposedly. I don’t allow them to cook in their room because of the dangers of fire. If they bring their own spirit stove, you don’t know what might happen, not to mention that all I have here is old furniture, furniture of value that’s been handed down through my family. She tried to hide it, but I found breadcrumbs, and she sometimes burned scrap paper that must have been used to wrap cold meats.’

‘Did she spend her evenings alone in her room?’

‘Most of the time. She only went out two or three times a week.’

‘Did she dress up to go out?’

‘How could she have dressed up, when the only things she owned were a dress and a coat? Last month, what I’d thought would happen happened.’

‘What had you thought?’

‘That eventually she wouldn’t have enough money to pay her rent.’

‘She couldn’t pay?’

‘She gave me a hundred francs on account and promised I’d get the rest at the end of the week. When the end of the week came, she tried to avoid me. I intercepted her. She told me she’d have money in a day or two. Don’t think I’m stingy, or that I only think about

money. Of course, I need it like anybody else. But if only she'd behaved like a human being, I'd have been more patient.'

'Did you tell her she had to leave?'

'Three days ago, the day before she disappeared. I simply told her that I was expecting a relative from the provinces and that I needed the room.'

'What was her reaction?'

'She said, "All right!" '

'Will you take us to her room?'

The old lady stood up, still dignified.

'Come this way. You'll see, she wouldn't have found a room like that anywhere else.'

It was true that the room was vast, with large windows. Like the living room, it was furnished in the style of the previous century. The bed was of solid mahogany, and between the windows was an Empire desk that must have been Monsieur Crêmieux's desk and for which no other place had been found. Heavy velvet curtains framed the windows, and on the walls hung old family photographs in black or gold frames.

'The only small bother is that you have to share the bathroom. I always waited for her to go in first and never went in without knocking.'

'I assume you haven't removed anything since she left?'

'Certainly not.'

'When she didn't come back, did you look through her things?'

'There's not much to look through. I only came in to see if she had taken her things with her.'

'And had she?'

'No. You can see for yourself.'

On the chest of drawers lay a comb, a hairbrush, a cheap manicure set and a powder compact of a common brand. There was also a tube of aspirin and another tube containing sleeping pills.

Maigret opened the drawers. All he found in them was a little underwear and an electric iron rolled up inside an artificial silk slip.

'What did I tell you?' Madame Crêmieux exclaimed.

'What?'

'I'd also told her I didn't allow washing and ironing of clothes. So that's what she did when she shut herself up for an hour in the bathroom of an evening! And why she locked her door, too.'

Another drawer contained a box of ordinary writing paper, two

or three pencils and a pen.

In the wardrobe, a cotton dressing gown was hanging. In a corner stood a suitcase made of blue fabric. It was locked, and there was no key to be seen. Maigret snapped the lock open with the tip of his penknife while the old woman came closer. The suitcase was empty.

'Did anybody ever come asking for her?'

'No, nobody.'

'Did you ever get the impression that someone had come into the apartment in your absence?'

'I would have noticed. I know exactly where everything is!'

'Did she ever get any telephone calls?'

'Only once.'

'When was that?'

'About two weeks ago. No. Longer than that. Perhaps a month. One evening, about eight o'clock, when she was in her room, someone asked to speak to her.'

'A man?'

'A woman.'

'Can you remember the exact words?'

'They said, "Is Mademoiselle Laboine in?" I replied that I thought she was. I went and knocked on her door. "Telephone, Mademoiselle Louise!" "For me?" she said, surprised. "For you, yes." "I'm coming." That was the time I had the impression she'd been crying.'

'Before or after the telephone call?'

'Before, when she came out of her room.'

'Was she fully dressed?'

'No. She was in her dressing gown, and her feet were bare.'

'Did you hear what she said?'

'She said hardly anything. Only: "Yes … yes … All right … Who? … Maybe …" And finally: "See you in a while." '

'Did she go out?'

'Ten minutes later.'

'What time did she come back that evening?'

'She didn't come back all night. It wasn't until six in the morning that I saw her come in. I'd been waiting for her, determined to throw her out. She told me she'd had to spend the night with a sick relative. She didn't look like someone who'd been enjoying herself. She went to bed and didn't leave her room for two days. I was the one who brought her food and bought her the aspirin. She

complained that she had 'flu.'

Did she suspect that every phrase was forming an image in Maigret's mind? He seemed barely to be listening to her. Gradually, he was reconstructing the life of the two women in the dark, cluttered apartment. For one of them at least, it was simple: he had her there in front of him. What was harder to imagine were the girl's attitudes, her voice, her gestures, let alone what she might have been thinking.

At least he now knew her name, assuming it was her real name. He knew where she had slept for the last two months, where she had spent part of her evenings.

He also knew that she had twice gone to Rue de Douai to rent or borrow an evening gown. The first time, she had paid. The second, she only had two or three hundred francs in her pocket, barely enough for a taxi ride or a frugal meal.

Was the first time she had gone to see Mademoiselle Irène just after that phone call? It seemed unlikely. That time, it hadn't been quite that late when she had arrived at the shop.

Plus, she had got back to Rue de Clichy at six in the morning, dressed in her usual dress and coat. She wouldn't have had time to give the blue satin gown back to Mademoiselle Irène, who got up late.

The thing that emerged from all of this was that two months earlier, around the beginning of January, she hadn't yet been at the end of her tether, since she had rented a room. She didn't have much money. She had bargained to obtain a reduction in the rent. She would leave in the morning at more or less regular hours, first about eight o'clock, then after nine.

What did she do with her days? Or the evenings she didn't spend in her room?

She didn't read. There were no books in the room, no magazines. If she sewed, it was only to mend her clothes and underwear: in a drawer, he found just three reels of cotton, a thimble, a pair of scissors, beige silk for the stockings and a few needles in a case.

According to Dr Paul, she was about twenty.

'I swear this is the last time I sub-let!'

'I assume she cleaned her room herself?'

'What do you think I am, her maid? One of them tried, and believe me, she didn't get very far.'

'How did she spend her Sundays?'

‘In the morning, she’d sleep late. Right from the first week, I noticed she didn’t go to mass. I asked her if she was a Catholic. She said she was. It was just to say something, don’t you see? Sometimes, she didn’t go out until after one in the afternoon. I assume she went to the cinema. I remember picking up a cinema ticket in her room.’

‘You don’t know what cinema it was?’

‘I didn’t pay attention. It was a pink ticket.’

‘Just one?’ All at once, Maigret gave the old woman a severe look, as if trying to prevent her from lying. ‘What was in her handbag?’

‘How should I—?’

‘Just answer the question. I’m sure you glanced inside whenever she left it lying around.’

‘She almost never left it lying around.’

‘It only took one time. Did you see her identity card?’

‘No.’

‘Didn’t she have one?’

‘Not in her bag. At least it wasn’t there that time. It was only a week ago that I had the opportunity to look. I was starting to have my suspicions.’

‘Suspicions about what?’

‘If she’d had a regular job, she’d have been able to pay her rent. And it was the first time I’d seen a girl her age who owned only one dress. But there was no way to get any information from her about what she did, where she came from, where her family lived.’

‘What did you think?’

‘That … she might have run away from home. Or else …’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. I couldn’t place her, if you know what I mean. With some people, you know immediately who you’re dealing with. Not with her. She didn’t have an accent. She didn’t seem to have come from the country either. I think she was well-educated. Apart from the way she didn’t answer questions and always avoided me, she was quite polite. Yes, I think she’d had a decent upbringing.’

‘What was in her handbag?’

‘Lipstick, a powder compact, a handkerchief and some keys.’

‘What keys?’

‘The key to the apartment, which I’d given her, and the key to her suitcase. There was also a worn wallet with money and a

photograph.'

'A photograph of a man or a woman?'

'A man. But it's not what you think. It was a photograph that was at least fifteen years old, all yellowed and torn, of a man in his forties.'

'Can you describe him?'

'A good-looking man, quite elegant. What struck me was that he was wearing a very light-coloured suit, probably linen, the kind I often saw in Nice. The reason I thought of Nice was because there was a palm tree behind him.'

'Did you notice any resemblance?'

'With her? No. I thought of that, too. If it was her father, she didn't look like him.'

'Would you recognize him if you met him?'

'Provided he hasn't changed too much.'

'Did you mention it to the girl?'

'How could I tell her I'd seen the photograph? By opening her bag? I only talked to her about Nice, the South …'

'You can take it all away, Janvier,' Maigret said, pointing to the drawers, the dressing gown in the wardrobe, the blue suitcase. The suitcase was big enough to hold everything, and, as the lock was broken, they had to ask the old lady for a piece of string to close it.

'Do you think I'll get into trouble?'

'Not with us.'

'With the tax authorities?'

Maigret shrugged. 'It's none of our business,' he grunted.

4.

In which there is mention of a girl on a bench and a bride in a nightclub

Through the half-open door, which she had taken care not to close completely, the old woman had watched them walk, not to the lift or the stairs, but to the apartment opposite. When they came out, Maigret saw the door move and merely said to Janvier as they went downstairs:

'She's jealous.'

Once, at the trial of a man he had arrested, someone who was following the court proceedings with him had murmured:

'I wonder what he's thinking about.'

To which Maigret had replied:

'He's thinking about what the newspapers will say about him in their next edition.'

He always claimed that murderers, at least until they are sentenced, are less concerned with their crimes, let alone the memory of their victims, than with the effect they have on the public. Overnight, they have become stars. They are besieged by reporters and photographers. Sometimes the public queue for hours to be allowed in to look at them. Isn't it only natural that they start to enjoy being in the spotlight?

The widow Crêmieux had certainly not been enchanted to see the police invade her home. Moreover, Maigret had a way of asking questions that prevented people from answering the way they would have liked. She had been forced to admit certain things that

were not very pleasant.

But at least, for nearly an hour, she had been the centre of attention. The slightest thing she said had even been written down in a notebook!

But a moment later, the same inspector went and rang the doorbell opposite and paid the same attention to a common little maid.

'How about a drink?'

It was after eleven. They went into a bar on the corner of the street and drank their aperitifs without saying a word, as if both pondering what they had just learned.

Louise Laboine was like one of those photographic plates dipped in developer. Two days earlier, they had not even known of her existence. Then she had been a blue shape, a profile on the wet pavement of Place Vintimille, a white body on the marble of the Forensic Institute. Now she had a name, and an image was beginning to form, even though it still lacked detail.

Rose's employer had also been a little annoyed when Maigret had said to her:

'Would you mind looking after the children while we ask your maid a few questions?'

Rose was not even sixteen and still had down on her cheeks.

'It was you who phoned me this morning, wasn't it?'

'Yes, monsieur.'

'Did you know Louise Laboine?'

'I didn't know her name.'

'Did you see her on the stairs?'

'Yes, monsieur.'

'Did she talk to you?'

'She never spoke to me, but she always smiled at me. I always thought she was sad. She looked like a film actress.'

'Did you ever see her anywhere apart from on the stairs?'

'Yes, a few times.'

'Where?'

'On the park bench on Place de la Trinité, where I go almost every afternoon with the children.'

'What was she doing there?'

'Nothing.'

'Was she waiting for someone?'

'I never saw her with anyone.'

‘Was she reading?’

‘No. She was eating a sandwich once. Do you think she knew she was going to die?’

That was all that Rose had told them. It was an indication that, for some time anyway, the girl hadn’t had a regular job. She didn’t bother to go far. She would walk down Rue de Clichy and, without leaving the area, sit down facing the Trinité church.

It had occurred to Maigret to ask:

‘Did you ever see her go into the church?’

‘No, monsieur.’

Maigret paid, wiped his mouth and got back in the little car, followed by Janvier. Back at headquarters, he immediately spotted a solemn figure in the waiting room and recognized Lognon, whose nose was redder than ever.

‘Have you been waiting for me, Lognon?’

‘Yes, for an hour.’

‘You look as if you never even went to bed.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Come into my office.’

The people who had seen Lognon waiting must have taken him, not for a policeman, but, because he looked so glum and sombre, for someone who had come to make a confession. This time, he really did have a cold, his voice was hoarse, and he had to keep taking his handkerchief out of his pocket. But he didn’t complain, merely assumed a resigned air, the air of a man who has suffered his whole life and will suffer for the rest of his days.

Maigret sat down and filled his pipe, while Lognon perched on the edge of a chair and didn’t dare utter a word.

‘I assume you have some news?’

‘I came to make my report.’

‘I’m listening, my friend.’

Cordiality had no effect on Inspector Hard-Done-By, who probably saw it as some kind of irony.

‘Last night, I did the same round as the night before, but took more care over it. Up until around three in the morning, four minutes past three to be precise, it didn’t get me anywhere.’ As he spoke, he took a piece of paper from his pocket. ‘But then, at four minutes past three, outside a nightclub called the Grelot, I questioned a taxi-driver named Léon Zirkt. He’s fifty-three years old and lives in Levallois-Perret.’

These details were probably pointless, but Lognon was determined to dot every *i* and cross every *t*. It was his way of emphasizing that he was merely a subordinate whose job was not to judge what was important and what wasn't. He spoke in a monotonous voice, without looking at Maigret, who couldn't help smiling.

'I showed him the photograph, or rather the photographs, and he recognized the one in the evening gown.'

He paused, just like an actor. He didn't yet know that Maigret had already discovered the dead girl's identity, as well as her last known address.

'On the night of Monday to Tuesday, just before midnight, Léon Zirkt was parked outside the Roméo, a new club in Rue Caumartin.'

He had prepared everything in advance. He took another piece of paper from his pocket, a press cutting this time.

'That night, unusually, the Roméo wasn't open to its regular customers, because the room had been booked for a wedding reception.'

Like a lawyer in court placing a document in front of the judge, he placed the press cutting in front of Maigret and went and sat down again.

'As you can see, it was the wedding of a certain Marco Santoni, the representative in France of a leading brand of Italian vermouth, and a young woman named Jeanine Armenieu, resident in Paris, unemployed. There were a lot of guests, because Marco Santoni is apparently well known in the kind of circles where people like to enjoy themselves.'

'Was it the driver who provided you with all these details?'

'No. I went to the Roméo myself. Anyway, Zirkt was waiting outside with a number of his colleagues. It was raining, though not heavily. At about a quarter past midnight, a girl in a blue evening gown and a velvet cape came out of the club and started walking along the street. Zirkt called to her and asked her, as is traditional, if she needed a taxi. She just shook her head and continued on her way.'

'Is he sure it was her?'

'Yes. There's a neon sign over the entrance to the Roméo. He's used to working nights and he noticed that the gown was fairly shabby. Plus, Gaston Rouget, the Roméo's tout, also recognized the photograph.'

‘I don’t suppose the driver knows where she went?’

Lognon had to blow his nose. He didn’t seem triumphant. On the contrary, he was being exaggeratedly humble, as if apologizing for the little he had brought.

‘A couple came out just then, I mean, a few minutes later, and asked to be driven to the Étoile. As Zirkt drove through Place Saint-Augustin, he saw the girl again, crossing the square on foot. She was walking quickly in the direction of Boulevard Haussmann, as if she was on her way to the Champs-Élysées.’

‘Is that all?’

‘He dropped the couple and was surprised to see her again later on the corner of Boulevard Haussmann and Faubourg Saint-Honoré. She was still walking. He looked at the time, because he was curious to see how long it had taken her to go all that way. It wasn’t far off an hour.’

It had been about two o’clock when Louise Laboine had been killed, and at three o’clock she was found dead on Place Vintimille.

Lognon had done a good job. And he hadn’t finished yet, as Maigret realized when he saw him remain in his seat and take a third piece of paper from his pocket.

‘Marco Santoni has an apartment in Rue de Berri.’

‘Did you see him, too?’

‘No. After the reception at the Roméo, the newlyweds flew to Florence, where they’re supposed to be spending a few days. I talked to his manservant, Joseph Ruchon.’

Lognon didn’t have a car at his disposal. He certainly hadn’t taken taxis, knowing that they would go through his expenses with a fine-tooth comb. During the night, he had had to go everywhere on foot, and in the morning he had probably taken the Métro or the bus.

‘I also questioned the barman of Fouquet’s on the Champs-Élysées, and the barmen of two other establishments. I wasn’t able to see the barman of Maxim’s: he lives in the suburbs and hadn’t arrived yet.’

His pocket seemed inexhaustible. As he went on, he fished out more pieces of paper, each corresponding to a different phase of his investigation.

‘Santoni is forty-five. He’s a handsome man, somewhat on the big side, very well cared for. He spends a lot of time in nightclubs and bars and the best restaurants. He’s had lots of girlfriends, most of

them models or dancers. Four or five months ago, as far as I've been able to find out, he met Jeanine Armenieu.'

'Was she a model?'

'No. She didn't move in the same circles. He's never said where he discovered her.'

'How old is she?'

'Twenty-two. Soon after making Santoni's acquaintance, she moved into the Hôtel Washington in Rue Washington. Santoni often visited her there and Jeanine sometimes spent the night in his apartment.'

'Is it his first marriage?'

'Yes.'

'Has the manservant seen the photograph of the dead girl?'

'I showed it to him. He claims he doesn't know her. I also showed it to the three barmen, who all gave me the same reply.'

'Was the manservant in the apartment on the night of Monday to Tuesday?'

'He was finishing getting the luggage ready for the couple's departure. Nobody came there. Santoni and his new wife arrived at five in the morning, in a very good mood, changed and rushed to Orly.'

There was another silence. Each time Lognon made it seem as if he had come to the end of the road, but from the quality of his silence and the humility of his attitude, Maigret guessed that such was not the case.

'Do you know if the girl stayed at the Roméo for a long time?'

'I told you, I questioned the tout.'

'Did they ask people to show their invitations on the way in?'

'No. Some people showed them, others didn't. The tout remembers seeing the girl come in just before midnight, when the dancing had started. It was because she didn't look like a regular customer that he let her in, thinking she was a friend of the bride's.'

'So she stayed for about a quarter of an hour?'

'Yes. I questioned the barman.'

'Was he at the Roméo this morning?'

To which Lognon simply replied, 'No. I went to see him at home, at the Porte des Ternes. He was asleep.'

Putting all these comings and goings end to end, they represented an impressive number of kilometres. In spite of himself, Maigret imagined Lognon doing them all on foot, through the night, then

through the early morning, like an ant carrying a weight that's too heavy for it but that nothing can divert from its route.

There was probably no other inspector who could have carried out a task like that, neglecting no details, leaving nothing to chance, and yet poor Lognon, whose sole ambition for the past twenty years had been to work at Quai des Orfèvres, would never get there.

That was partly to do with his manner. It was also to do with the fact that he didn't have the basic training considered essential and that he failed all his exams.

'What does the barman say?'

Another piece of paper, with a name, an address, a few notes. Lognon didn't need to consult these papers, he knew it all by heart.

'He first noticed her standing near the door. The head waiter approached her and said a few words to her in a low voice. She shook her head. He was probably asking her what table she was expected at. Then she made her way through the crowd. A lot of people were on their feet. They were dancing not only on the dance-floor but between the tables.'

'Did she talk to the bride?'

'It took her a while, because the bride was also dancing. The girl finally managed to approach her, and they had a fairly long conversation. Santoni interrupted them twice. He seemed to be losing patience.'

'Did the bride give her anything?'

'I asked that question. The barman couldn't answer it.'

'Did they look as if they were arguing?'

'Madame Santoni apparently looked reserved, even cold. She shook her head several times. After that, the barman lost sight of the girl in blue.'

'I don't suppose you questioned the head waiter?'

It was becoming like a game.

'He lives in Rue Caulaincourt, right at the top. He was also asleep.'

Of course Lognon had gone there, too!

'He confirmed what the barman had told me. He approached the girl and asked her who she was looking for, and she told him she was a friend of the bride's and wanted to have a quick word with her.'

This time, Lognon stood up, which meant that he had at last said

all he had to say.

'You've done an amazing job, my friend.'

'I did what I had to do.'

'Now go to bed. You need to look after yourself.'

'It's only a cold.'

'If you're not careful, it might turn into bronchitis.'

'I have an attack of bronchitis every winter and I've never taken to my bed because of it.'

That was the trouble with Lognon. He had, by the sweat of his brow, it had to be admitted, gathered a certain amount of information that was probably valuable. If this information had been brought by one of his inspectors, Maigret would have immediately put a few others on the trail in order to get the most out of it. One man can't do everything.

But if Maigret did that, Lognon would be convinced that they were stealing the case from him.

He was dead tired, his voice was hoarse, and his cold was getting the better of him. He hadn't slept more than seven or eight hours in three nights. Maigret, though, had no choice but to let him continue. Not that that would stop him considering himself a victim, like a poor man who is left the most thankless tasks and who, at the last moment, is denied the credit for his success.

'What do you have in mind?'

'Unless you intend to assign someone else …'

'No, of course not! I was only thinking about you, and how you ought to get some rest.'

'I'll have plenty of time to rest when they retire me. I didn't have a chance to get to the town hall of the eighth arrondissement, where the wedding took place, or to the Hôtel Washington, where the new Madame Santoni lived before she got married. When I do, I should be able to find out where she lived before and, through that, it's possible I can get hold of the dead girl's address.'

'For the past two months, the dead girl lived in Rue de Clichy, with a woman named Madame Crêmieux, a widow who sub-let her a room in her apartment.'

Lognon pursed his lips.

'We don't know what she was doing before that. She told the widow Crêmieux her name was Louise Laboine. Her landlady didn't see her identity card.'

'May I continue my investigation?'

What was the point in objecting?

'Of course, my friend, if you want. But please don't overdo it.'

'Thank you.'

Maigret remained alone in his office for a while, staring at the chair on which Lognon had just been sitting, but without seeing it.

Still as if on a photographic plate, new features of Louise Laboine were appearing, but the overall picture remained blurred.

During the last two months, when she didn't have a regular job, had she been searching for Jeanine Armenieu?

It was possible, for example, that she had suddenly read in the newspaper that Jeanine was marrying Marco Santoni and that a big reception was being held at the Roméo to mark the occasion.

In that case, she had read the newspaper late in the afternoon, since it was after nine o'clock when she had rushed to Mademoiselle Irène's to get hold of an evening gown. She had left the shop in Rue de Douai at about ten.

What had she done outdoors from ten to midnight? It doesn't take much more than twenty minutes to walk from Rue de Douai to Rue Caumartin.

Could she have spent all that time out in the street, unsure what to do?

Dr Paul's report was still on the desk. Maigret glanced through it. It specified that the dead girl's stomach contained a certain quantity of alcohol.

But if the head waiter was to be believed, the girl hadn't had a chance to drink anything during the fairly brief time she had spent at the Roméo.

Either she had drunk something earlier, to pluck up courage, or she had drunk something between the time she had left the wedding and the time she was found dead on Place de Vintimille.

He went and opened the door to the inspectors' office and called Janvier.

'I have a job for you. I want you to go to Rue de Douai. From there, go on foot as far as Rue Caumartin, stop in all the bars and cafés and show the photograph.'

'The one where she's in evening dress?'

'Yes. Try to find out if anybody saw the girl between ten and midnight on Monday night.'

Maigret called him back just as Janvier was about to close the door behind him.

‘If you run into Lognon, don’t tell him what you’re up to.’

‘Got it, chief!’

The blue suitcase was in a corner of the office. It didn’t seem to have anything more to tell them. It was a cheap suitcase, the kind sold in all the general stores and in the areas around railway stations, and it was worn.

Maigret left his office and headed for that of his Vice Squad colleague Priollet at the end of the corridor. Priollet was signing his mail, and Maigret calmly smoked his pipe and watched him.

‘Do you need me?’

‘I need some information. Do you know a man named Santoni?’

‘Marco?’

‘Yes.’

‘He just got married.’

‘What do you know about him?’

‘He makes lots of money and spends it as quickly as he earns it. A handsome fellow who loves women, good food and luxury cars.’

‘Anything against him?’

‘No, nothing. He’s from a good family in Milan. His father’s a big shot in vermouth, and Marco represents the brand throughout France. He’s seen in the bars on the Champs-Élysées and in all the top restaurants, always with pretty girls. A few months ago, one of them hooked him.’

‘Jeanine Armenieu.’

‘I didn’t know her name. We have no reason to take an interest in him or his love affairs. I only found out he was getting married because he held a big bash in a nightclub that he hired for the occasion.’

‘I’d like you to find out what you can about his wife. She lived in the Hôtel Washington over the last few months. I need to know where she’s from, what she did before she met him, and who her friends were. Especially her female friends.’

Priollet was writing a few words in pencil on a notepad.

‘Is that all? Is there any connection with the dead girl on Place Vintimille?’

Maigret nodded. ‘I don’t suppose you have anything in your files on a girl named Louise Laboine?’

Priollet turned to an open door. ‘Dauphin! Did you hear the name?’

‘Yes, chief.’

‘Can you check?’

A few minutes later, Inspector Dauphin shouted from the next room, ‘Nothing on her.’

‘Sorry, old man. I’m going to look into Madame Santoni. But it’s going to be difficult to question her for a while. According to the newspapers, the newlyweds are in Italy.’

‘I don’t want her to be questioned for now.’

It was a few minutes to midday according to the clock on the mantelpiece, the same black clock as in Maigret’s office and in the offices of all the chief inspectors.

‘How about a drink?’

‘Not now,’ Priollet replied. ‘I’m waiting for someone.’

It was as if Maigret didn’t know what to do with his big body. They saw him slowly walk down the corridor and look morosely into the waiting room with its windowed walls, where two or three people were twiddling their thumbs. A few minutes later, he was climbing the steps of the narrow staircase and opening the door to the lab right at the top of the Palais de Justice. Moers was bent over a microscope.

‘Have you examined the clothes I sent you?’

Here, there was never any bustle; men in grey overalls carried out meticulous work, handling complicated equipment, in a calm atmosphere. Moers was the very image of inner peace.

‘The black dress,’ he said, ‘has never been sent to the dry cleaner’s, but the stains have often been cleaned with benzine and regularly brushed. All the same, there were still some residues of dust encrusted in the fabric. I’ve analysed them, and I’ve also examined a few stains that resisted the benzine. That’s how I found green paint.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Almost. There are a few grains of sand, too.’

‘River sand?’

‘Sea sand, the kind you find on the coast of Normandy.’

‘Isn’t it the same as the sand you find on the Mediterranean?’

‘No. Or on the ocean.’

Maigret hung about the lab a while longer. He emptied his pipe by knocking it on his heel. By the time he got back downstairs, it was past midday, and the inspectors were already going to lunch.

‘Lucas is looking for you!’ said Jussieu, who was working in his department.

He found Lucas with his hat on his head.

'I was just about to leave. I left a note on your desk. Féret wants you to call him as soon as possible. Apparently, it's about the dead girl.'

Maigret went back into his office and picked up the phone.

'Put me through to the Flying Squad in Nice.'

They had never received so few telephone calls after the publication of a photograph in the newspapers. So far there had only been one, the one from Rose, the young maid in Rue de Clichy.

And yet dozens, hundreds of people must have seen the girl, who had been in Paris for several months at least.

'Hello, Féret?'

'Is that you, chief?'

Inspector Féret had worked for Maigret before being assigned to Nice, where he had asked to be transferred because of his wife's health.

'I had a telephone call early this morning about the person you're interested in. By the way, do you now know her name?'

'Apparently, it's Louise Laboine.'

'That's right. Shall I give you the details? Mind you, it's not much. I was waiting for your instructions before starting a more in-depth inquiry. Anyway, this morning, about eight thirty, I had a telephone call from a fishmonger, a woman named Alice Feynerou … Hello?'

'I'm still here.'

Maigret noted down the name on one of Lognon's pieces of paper, just in case.

'She claims she recognizes the photograph that's just been published in the *Éclaireur*. But it's from quite a long way back. Four or five years, apparently. The girl, who was only little at the time, lived with her mother in the building next door to the fishmonger's.'

'Was this woman able to provide details?'

'Seems the mother was a bad payer, that's the thing she remembers most. "The kind of people you should never give credit to," she told me.'

'What else did she tell you?'

'The mother and the daughter lived in a fairly decent apartment, not far from Avenue Clemenceau. The mother had been quite a looker once, it seems. She's older than the mother of a daughter of fifteen or sixteen usually is. At that time, she was well past fifty.'

‘What did the two of them live on?’

‘Nobody knows. The mother used to dress up, go out after lunch and not come back until late at night.’

‘Is that all? No man involved?’

‘No. If there’d been anything irregular, the fishmonger would have been only too happy to tell me.’

‘Did they leave the neighbourhood together?’

‘So it seems. One fine day, they vanished, and apparently they left quite a few debts behind them.’

‘Have you checked that the name Laboine isn’t in your files?’

‘That was the first thing I thought of. There’s nothing. I’ve asked my colleagues. One of the old timers says it sounds familiar, but he can’t quite remember.’

‘Will you look into it?’

‘I’ll do my best. What do you want to know in particular?’

‘Everything. When the girl left Nice. What became of the mother. How they got by. The people they rubbed shoulders with. By the way, if the girl was fifteen or sixteen at the time, it’s likely she was still going to school. Can you check the local schools?’

‘Got it. I’ll call you as soon as I have anything new.’

‘Check the casino, too, for the mother.’

‘Actually, I was just thinking that.’

So now a few more features had been added to the picture. This telephone call had evoked an adolescent girl, a girl who went and bought fish from a fishmonger her mother owed money to and who received her coolly.

Maigret put on his hat and coat and went downstairs, where he passed a man being brought in by two gendarmes but didn’t look at him. Before crossing the courtyard, he went into the office of the Hotel Agency. He had written Louise’s name on a piece of paper, as well as that of Jeanine Armenieu.

‘Can you ask your men to check these two names in their records? Last year rather than this year.’

It was better if poor Lognon didn’t know they were doing part of his work.

A shower having finished a few minutes earlier, the sun had come out and you could already see the rain drying on the cobbles. Maigret almost stopped a passing taxi, changed his mind and walked slowly to the Brasserie Dauphine, where he went and stood at the bar. He didn’t know what he wanted to drink. Two inspectors

who were not in his department were discussing the pension age.

'What'll it be, Monsieur Maigret?'

Anyone would have thought he was in a bad mood, but those who knew him realized that this wasn't the case. It was just that he was everywhere at the same time, in the widow's apartment in Rue de Clichy, at the dress shop in Rue de Douai, on the bench on Place de la Trinité, and now in Nice, imagining an adolescent girl at a fishmonger's.

All these images were mixed up together, still vague. Something was bound to come out of it in the end. There was one above all that he couldn't get rid of: the image of a naked body beneath a harsh electric light, with the figure of Dr Paul in his white coat, putting on his rubber gloves.

'A Pernod!' he said mechanically.

Hadn't Paul told him that before she received a number of blows to the head, the girl had fallen to her knees?

A little earlier, she had been at the Roméo in Rue Caumartin, where a taxi-driver had noticed her shabby dress, where the barman had seen her make her way through the dancers, and where she had talked to the head waiter, then the bride.

Subsequently, she had walked in the rain. She had been seen crossing Place Saint-Augustin, then glimpsed on the corner of Boulevard Haussmann and Faubourg Saint-Honoré.

What was she thinking during that time? Where was she going? What was she hoping for?

She had almost no money left, barely enough for a meal. Old Madame Crêmieux had thrown her out.

She couldn't have gone very far. Somewhere along the way she had been slapped or punched and had fallen to her knees, and then someone had struck her on the head with a blunt instrument.

That had happened around two o'clock, if the postmortem was to be believed. What had she done from midnight to two o'clock?

After that, it had no longer been in her hands but in those of the killer, who had gone to the trouble of dumping her body in the middle of Place Vintimille.

'Strange girl!' he muttered.

'What did you say?' the waiter asked.

'Nothing. What time is it?'

He went home for lunch.

'That question you asked me last night,' Madame Maigret said as

they were both eating. ‘I’ve been thinking about it all morning. There’s another reason for a girl to wear an evening gown.’

He wasn’t as tactful with her as he had been with Lognon. Without giving her time to speak, he murmured distractedly:

‘I know. It was for a wedding.’

Madame Maigret said nothing more.

5.

About a lady who earns her living at the roulette wheel, an old maid determined to tell all and a girl who hides under the bed

Twice, perhaps three times, that afternoon, Maigret raised his head from his papers and looked at the sky, and as it was such an innocent-looking blue, with gold-fringed clouds and sunlight streaming from the roofs, he broke off with a sigh and went and opened the window.

On each occasion, he barely had time to go back to his seat and savour a breath of spring that gave a particular flavour to his pipe before the papers started rustling, flying up and scattering around the room.

Now the clouds were no longer white and gold but blue-grey, the rain was falling diagonally, pattering on the window ledge, and out there on Pont Saint-Michel people were suddenly walking more quickly, as in the old silent films, and the women were holding their skirts.

The second time, it wasn't rain that fell, but hailstones that bounced like ping-pong balls, and when he closed the window again, he found some of them in the middle of the room.

Was Lognon still outside, sad-eyed, ears down like a hunting dog, following God knows what lead amid the crowds? It was possible. It was likely. He hadn't phoned. He never took an umbrella with him. Nor was he the kind of man to take shelter in a carriage entrance with other people and wait for the shower to ease off. On the

contrary, he probably felt a kind of bitter pleasure in getting soaked, in walking the streets alone in the driving rain, a victim of injustice and his own conscience.

As for Janvier, he had returned about three o'clock, slightly tipsy. It was rare to see him like this, his eyes brighter than usual, his voice more cheerful.

'I did it, chief!'

'What did you do?'

To hear him, you might have thought he had just found the girl alive again.

'You were right.'

'You'll have to explain.'

'I went to all the bars and cafés.'

'So I see.'

'The only place she stopped was on the corner of Rue Caumartin and Rue Saint-Lazare. The waiter who served her is called Eugène. He's bald, lives in Bécon-les-Bruyères and has a daughter about the same age as the dead girl.'

Janvier stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray and lit another.

'She arrived about ten thirty and sat down in a corner near the cash desk. She seemed to be cold and ordered a toddy. Then, when Eugène served it to her, she asked for a telephone token. She went into the booth. She came out again almost immediately. From then until almost midnight, she tried at least ten times to get someone on the phone.'

'How many toddies did she drink?'

'Three. Every few minutes, she'd go back to the booth and dial a number.'

'Did she get through in the end?'

'Eugène doesn't know. Each time, he expected her to start crying, but she didn't. After a while, he tried to strike up a conversation, and she looked at him without replying. You see, it all fits. She left the shop in Rue de Douai just after ten. She had time to walk down as far as Rue Caumartin. She stayed in the café, trying to get someone on the phone, until she set off for the Roméo. For a girl, three toddies isn't bad. She must have been a bit sozzled.'

'And she had no more money in her bag,' Maigret remarked.

'I hadn't thought of that. It's true. What should I do now?'

'Do you have anything underway?'

'Only routine stuff.'

Now he, too, was bent over his desk, doubtless regretting that his rounds hadn't taken longer.

Maigret leafed through some files, made a few notes and every now and again phoned another department. It was nearly five o'clock when he saw Priollet come in.

'I hope I'm not disturbing you?' Priollet asked before sitting down.

'Not at all. I'm wrapping up some old cases.'

'You know Lucien, one of my inspectors, who lives not far from you?'

Maigret vaguely recalled him. He was a small, fat man with very dark hair, whose wife ran a herbalist's shop in Rue du Chemin-Vert. He had often seen him in summer in the doorway of the shop, when Maigret and his wife went to dinner with Dr Pardon.

'A quarter of an hour ago, I asked Lucien, just in case, like I've asked all my men.'

'About Jeanine Armenieu?'

'Yes. He looked at me and frowned. "That's odd," he said. "My wife was just talking about her over lunch. I didn't really pay much attention. Hold on a minute. I'm trying to remember what she said. Oh yes. 'You remember that pretty redhead with the nice breasts who used to live next door? She's just married into money. They hired a whole nightclub for the reception.' My wife said her name. And it was Armenieu. She added, 'I don't suppose she'll be coming in any more to buy cupping glasses.' " '

Maigret might have met her in the neighbourhood, too, and Madame Maigret might have done her shopping in the same shops as her, because she bought almost all her food in Rue du Chemin-Vert.

'Lucien asked me if he should look into it. I told him you'd probably prefer to stay in charge of the case.'

'Anything on Santoni?'

'Nothing interesting, apart from the fact that his friends were surprised that he was getting married. Until now, his love affairs have never lasted long.'

They were between showers. The sun was shining, the rain drying. Maigret had a strong desire to be outside, and he was just about to grab his coat and hat when the telephone rang.

'Hello, Detective Chief Inspector Maigret here.'

It was Nice. Féret must have something new, because he was as

excited as Janvier had been earlier.

'I tracked down the mother, chief! I had to go all the way to Monte Carlo to talk to her.'

It's almost always the same. You flounder for hours, days, sometimes weeks, then all the information comes in at the same time.

'Was she at the casino?'

'She still is. She told me she can't leave the roulette table until she's got back her stake and won what she needs.'

'Does she go there every day?'

'Just like other people go to the office. She plays until she wins the few hundred francs she needs to live on. Once she does, she leaves without ever trying for more.'

Maigret knew that way of life. 'What's the weather like down there?'

'Fantastic. The place is full of foreigners who've come for the carnival. The Battle of Flowers is tomorrow, and they're just putting up the platforms.'

'Is her name Laboine?'

'It says Germaine Laboine on her identity card, but she likes to be called Liliane. The croupiers all know her as Lili. She's nearly sixty, heavily made-up and covered in fake jewellery. You know the type, I'm sure. I had a hard time of it dragging her away from the roulette table. She was settled in like an old regular. To make her mind up for her, I had to tell her straight out, "Your daughter's dead." '

'Hadn't she seen it in the newspapers?' Maigret asked.

'She doesn't read the papers. The only thing these people care about is roulette. Every morning, they buy a little news sheet that lists the numbers that came up the previous night and the night before that. There are a few of them like that. They all take the same bus in Nice and rush to the tables like assistants in a department store rushing to their counters.'

'What was her reaction?'

'Hard to say. The red had just come up for the fifth time, and she had her bet on the black. First of all, she pushed a few chips across the baize. Her lips moved, but I couldn't hear what she was saying. It wasn't until the black finally came up and she collected her winnings that she stood up. "How did it happen?" she asked me.

' "Why don't you come outside with me?" I said.

' "I can't right now," she said, "I have to keep an eye on the table.

There's no reason we can't talk here. Where did it happen?"

‘ "In Paris."

‘ "Did she die in hospital?"

‘ "She was killed. She was found dead in the street."

‘ "Was it an accident?"

‘ "She was murdered."

‘She looked surprised, but she continued, from a distance, to listen to the voice of the croupier calling the shots. After a while, she interrupted me and said:

‘ "Do you mind?"

‘She went and put some chips on a space. I wondered if she was on drugs. Having thought it over, I don't think so. She's got to the point where she's just a kind of machine, know what I mean?'

Maigret said yes. He had seen others like her.

‘It took a long time to get anything out of her. She kept repeating:

‘ "Why don't you wait until this evening, when I get back to Nice? I'll tell you everything you want. There's nothing to hide."

‘Can you hear me, chief? Mind you, she wasn't completely wrong, saying she couldn't leave the casino. It's almost a profession with these people. They have a bit of capital, enough to double their stake a few times. As long as they're able to double it and their colour comes up in the end, they don't risk anything. They just have to be content with winning small amounts, enough to live on and take their bus every day. The casino management knows them. There are a few men among them, but most of them are elderly women. When there are a lot of people and all the tables are occupied, they get rid of them by giving them what they'd end up winning in a few hours anyway.'

‘Does she live alone?'

‘Yes. I'm supposed to be going to see her at home when she gets back. She has a furnished room in Rue Greuze, near Boulevard Victor-Hugo. Her dresses are at least ten years old, and so are her hats. I asked her if she was ever married, and she replied:

‘ "That depends on what you call married."

‘She told me she used to be an entertainer and that she toured the East and Asia Minor for years under the name Lili France. I suppose you know that, too?'

In the old days, agencies in Paris had recruited such entertainers. It was just a matter of teaching them a few dance steps, or a few songs. Then they were sent to Turkey, Egypt, Beirut, where they

worked as hostesses in cabarets.

'Is that where her daughter was born?'

'No. She was born in France, when her mother was nearly forty.'

'In Nice?'

'As far as I could gather. It isn't easy to question someone who has her eyes fixed on a little roulette ball and whose fingers tense each time the ball stops. In the end, she laid down the law:

' "I haven't done anything wrong, have I? So leave me alone. As long as I promise to answer your questions tonight …" '

'Is that all you found out?'

'No. The girl left four years ago, leaving a letter saying she wouldn't be coming back.'

'She must have been about sixteen at the time?'

'Sixteen exactly. She left on her birthday and has never been in touch with her mother since.'

'Didn't her mother inform the police?'

'No. I don't think she was upset to be rid of her.'

'Did she ever find out what had become of her?'

'She received a letter a few months later from a Mademoiselle Poré, who lives in Rue du Chemin-Vert, telling her she would do well to keep an eye on her daughter and preferably not leave her alone in Paris. I don't know Mademoiselle Poré's number. Madame Laboine promised to give it to me this evening.'

'I know where to find her.'

'So you know about this?'

'More or less.'

Maigret glanced at Priollet, who was listening. The same information was now coming in from several sides at the same time.

'What time are you supposed to be meeting her?'

'As soon as she gets back to Nice. It could be seven, it could be midnight. It all depends on the roulette wheel.'

'Call me at home.'

'OK, chief.'

Maigret hung up.

'According to what Féret has just told me from Nice,' he said, 'the person in whose apartment Jeanine Armenieu lived in Rue du Chemin-Vert is a Mademoiselle Poré. And this Mademoiselle Poré also knew Louise Laboine.'

'Are you going over there?'

Maigret opened the door. 'Can you come with me, Janvier?'

A few moments later, they were in the car. In Rue du Chemin-Vert, they stopped outside the herbalist's and found Lucien's wife behind the counter. It was a dark shop with a nice smell of St John's wort.

'What can I do for you, Monsieur Maigret?'

'I understand you know Jeanine Armenieu?'

'Did my husband tell you? I was talking to him about her at midday, because of the wedding I read about in the newspaper. She's a damned attractive girl.'

'When was the last time you saw her?'

'At least three years ago. Hold on. It was before my husband got his pay rise. That must have been about three and a half years ago. She was quite young, but already well developed, already very much a woman, and all the men turned to look at her in the street.'

'Did she live in the house next door?'

'With Mademoiselle Poré, a good customer of mine who works for the telephone company. Mademoiselle Poré's her aunt. I think in the end they didn't get on, and the girl decided to live on her own.'

'Do you think Mademoiselle Poré is at home?'

'If I'm not mistaken, this week she starts at six in the morning and finishes at three. There's a good chance you'll find her in.'

Soon afterwards, Maigret and Janvier entered the next building.

'Mademoiselle Poré?' they asked the concierge.

'Second floor on the left. There's already someone there.'

The building didn't have a lift. The staircase was dark. Instead of a doorbell, there was a soft rope hanging by the door that activated a shrill-sounding bell inside.

The door opened immediately. A thin woman with pointed features and small black eyes looked at them severely.

'What do you want?'

Just as Maigret was about to reply, he glimpsed Inspector Lognon's face in the half-light of the apartment.

'I'm sorry, Lognon. I didn't know you were here.'

Inspector Hard-Done-By was looking at him with a resigned expression.

'Do you two know each other?' Mademoiselle Poré asked.

She made up her mind to let them in. The apartment, which was very clean, smelled of cooking. Now there were four of them in a little dining room, not knowing where to put themselves.

'Have you been here long, Lognon?'

‘Barely five minutes.’

Now was not the time to ask him how he had discovered the address.

‘Have you already found out anything?’

It was Mademoiselle Poré who replied:

‘I’ve started to tell him what I know, and I haven’t finished. The only reason I didn’t go to the police when I saw the photograph in the paper was because I wasn’t sure I recognized her. In three and a half years, people can change, especially at that age. Anyway, I don’t like getting involved in things that are none of my concern.’

‘Jeanine Armenieu is your niece, isn’t she?’

‘It isn’t her I was talking about, but her friend. As for Jeanine, you’re right, she’s the daughter of my half-brother, and I don’t think much of the way he brought her up.’

‘Is she from the South?’

‘If you call Lyon the South. My poor brother works in a mill. Since he lost his wife he hasn’t been the same.’

‘When did his wife die?’

‘Last year.’

‘Was it four years ago that Jeanine Armenieu came to live in Paris?’

‘About four years ago, yes. Lyon wasn’t good enough for her any more. She was seventeen and wanted to live her own life. It seems they’re all like that these days. My brother wrote to tell me that he couldn’t keep his daughter at home any more, that she’d made up her mind to leave, and he asked me if I’d agree to put her up. I told him yes and that I might even be able to find her a job.’

She articulated every syllable clearly as she spoke, as if what she was saying was of vital importance. Looking at them in turn, she asked suddenly:

‘How come, since you’re all from the police, you arrived separately?’

What could they reply? Lognon bowed his head.

‘We belong to different departments,’ Maigret said.

Really putting her foot in it, she looked at Maigret’s imposing figure and said:

‘I assume you’re the most important? What’s your rank?’

‘Detective chief inspector.’

‘Are you Detective Chief Inspector Maigret?’

When he nodded, she moved a chair forwards for him.

‘Please sit down. I’m going to tell you everything. Where was I? Oh, yes, my half-brother’s letter. I can find it if you want. I keep all the letters I receive, including those from the family.’

‘Thank you, but that won’t be necessary.’

‘As you wish. To cut a long story short, I received this letter, I answered it, and one morning, about seven thirty, my niece arrived. That alone gives you an idea of her mentality. There are excellent day trains, but she was determined to take a night train. Because it’s more romantic, don’t you see? Fortunately, it was a week when I was on the late shift. We’ll pass over that. I won’t tell you how she was dressed, or how her hair was done. But I did have a quiet word with her about it, making no secret of the fact that if she didn’t want to be pointed out in the neighbourhood, she’d do best to change her style.

‘The apartment, which I’ve occupied for twenty-two years, isn’t large or luxurious, but all the same I have two bedrooms. I gave Jeanine one of them. For a week, I took her out to show her Paris.’

‘What were her plans?’

‘You’re asking me? Find a rich man, that was her plan. If I’m to believe what I read in the newspaper, she got what she wanted. Only I wouldn’t like to go through what she went through.’

‘Did she find a job?’

‘As a sales assistant in a shop on the Grands Boulevards. A leather goods shop near Place de l’Opéra.’

‘Did she stay there long?’

She was determined to tell the story her own way and made no secret of the fact.

‘If you keep asking me questions, you’re going to make me lose my thread. I’ll tell you everything, don’t worry. Anyway, we both lived here. Or to be more precise, I imagined we both lived here. One week out of two, I’m free in the mornings, and the other week after three in the afternoon. Months went by. It was winter. That winter was very cold. I continued to do my shopping in the neighbourhood as I’ve always been in the habit of doing. And it’s because of the food that I started to have my suspicions, especially because of the butter, which was disappearing at an unusual speed. The bread, too. Sometimes, I couldn’t find in the pantry the leftover meat or cake I was sure I’d left there.

‘ “Was it you who ate the cutlet?”

‘ “Yes, aunt. I was a bit peckish during the night.”

‘To cut a long story short, it took me a while to understand. You want to know the truth? During all that time, without my knowing it, there was a third person in my apartment.

‘Not a man, I can reassure you about that immediately. A girl. The one whose photograph was in the newspaper, the one who was found dead on Place Vintimille. Which just goes to show that I was right to be worried, because that’s the kind of thing that doesn’t happen to people like you and me.’

She didn’t even need to catch her breath. She remained standing, her back to the window, her hands crossed over her flat stomach, and the words and sentences just kept tumbling out in a kind of litany.

‘I’ve nearly finished, don’t worry. I don’t want to waste your time, because I’m sure you’re a very busy man.’

She was addressing Maigret alone. In her eyes, Lognon was merely a kind of extra.

‘One morning as I was doing the housework, I dropped a reel of thread. It rolled under Jeanine’s bed, and I bent down to pick it up. I admit I screamed, but I wonder what you would have done if it had been you. There was someone under the bed, someone looking at me with eyes like a cat’s.

‘At least it was a woman. That was less scary. I went to fetch the poker, just in case, and said:

‘ “Come out of there!”

‘She wasn’t even Jeanine’s age, barely more than sixteen. But if you think she cried and begged me for forgiveness, you’re wrong. She kept looking at me as if, out of the two of us, I was the one who was a kind of monster.

‘ “Who let you in?”

‘ “I’m a friend of Jeanine’s.”

‘ “Is that a reason to hide under the bed? What were you doing under there?”

‘ “Waiting for you to leave.”

‘ “In order to do what?”

‘ “To also leave.”

‘Can you imagine, inspector? It had been going on for weeks, months. She’d arrived in Paris at the same time as my niece. They’d met on the train. They were travelling third class, and as they couldn’t sleep they spent the night telling each other their life stories. The girl, whose name was Louise, had just enough money to

get by for two or three weeks.

'She found a job, sticking stamps on envelopes in some office or other, but apparently her boss lost no time in making propositions to her, and she slapped him in the face.

'At least that's what she told me, but it isn't necessarily the truth.

'When she had no money left, and she was thrown out of the rooming house where she was staying, she went to see Jeanine, and Jeanine suggested that for a few nights, just until she found another job, she could sleep here.

'Jeanine didn't dare tell me. She let her friend into the apartment while I was out, and until I fell asleep Louise hid under my niece's bed.

'The weeks when I was on the second shift, she had to stay under the bed until two thirty, because I don't start work until three.'

From the start, Maigret had been making an effort not to smile, because the woman wouldn't take her eyes off him and wouldn't have appreciated the slightest display of irony.

'To cut a long story short …' she repeated.

It was at least the third time she had said these words, and Maigret couldn't help looking at his watch.

'If I'm boring you …'

'Not at all.'

'Do you have somewhere else to be?'

'I still have time.'

'I've nearly finished. I just want to point out that for months, everything I said was overheard by a third party, an adventuress I didn't even know, who was watching all my comings and goings. I was leading my normal everyday life, thinking I was in my own home, without suspecting—'

'Did you write to her mother?'

'How do you know that? Did she tell you?'

Lognon looked disillusioned. He had discovered the Poré lead, which had probably necessitated several long and exhausting walks across Paris. How many rain showers had he taken on his shoulders, without bothering to find shelter?

Maigret, on the other hand, hadn't even had to leave his office. The information came to him without his having to move a muscle. Now, not only had he arrived at the Poré lead almost at the same time as Lognon, but he seemed to know more about it.

'I didn't write to her mother immediately. First of all, I threw the

girl out and told her never to set foot here again. I suppose I should have had her prosecuted.'

'For breaking and entering?'

'And for the food she stole from me during those months. When my niece came home, I told her exactly what I thought of her and her friends. Jeanine wasn't much better. I realized that when she left me a few weeks later and found a room in a hotel. Mademoiselle needed to be free, don't you see? In order to receive men!'

'Are you sure she received them?'

'Why would she have felt the need to go and live in a hotel when she had board and lodging here? I questioned her about her friend. I obtained the name and address of her mother. I hesitated for nearly a week, then wrote her a letter. I've kept a copy of it. I don't know if it had any effect. She certainly won't be able to claim that I didn't warn her! Do you want to see it?'

'That won't be necessary. Did you keep in touch with your niece after she left you?'

'She never even came to say hello, never thought of sending me New Year's greetings. I suppose all the younger generation are like that. The little I know about her, I heard from my brother, who's completely taken in by her. She's got him round her little finger. She writes to him from time to time, tells him she's working, that her health is good, and each time promises to go and see him soon.'

'Has she ever been back to Lyon?'

'Once, for Christmas.'

'Does she have any brothers or sisters?'

'She had a brother, who died in a sanatorium. To cut a long story short …'

Maigret was starting to count them, mechanically.

'She's of age. I assume she informed my brother she was getting married. He never told me. I read about it in the newspaper. The strangest thing is that her friend was killed the night she got married, don't you think?'

'Did they keep seeing each other?'

'How should I know? If you want my opinion, though, a girl like Louise didn't let go of her friend that easily. People like that, who sponge off others and hide under beds, won't let themselves be deterred by anything. And this Santoni's a really wealthy man …'

'So you didn't see your niece for three years?'

‘Just over three years. Once, last year, about July, I caught a glimpse of her on a train. It was at Gare Saint-Lazare. I was going to Mantes-la-Jolie for the day. It was very hot. I had some time off and was dying to see the countryside. A train was standing on the track next to ours, a luxury express, and I was told it was going to Deauville. Just as we were starting to move, I saw Jeanine in a compartment. She pointed me out to the person who was next to her, and at the last moment she gave me an ironic little wave.’

‘Was she with a woman?’

‘I couldn’t see. I got the impression that she was well dressed, and that the train consisted of only first-class carriages.’

Janvier, as usual, had been taking notes, not very many, because all this chatter could be summed up in a few words.

‘When your niece lived here, did you know anything about the company she kept?’

‘To hear her, she didn’t keep company with anyone. But it’s hard to trust a girl who hides people under her bed.’

‘I’m very grateful to you, mademoiselle.’

‘Is that all you want to know?’

‘Unless you have any other information?’

‘I don’t think so. No. But if I remember anything else …’

She watched them regretfully as they walked to the door. She really would have liked to have something else to say. Lognon let Maigret and Janvier go in front of him and was the last to walk down the stairs.

Once out in the street, Maigret wasn’t quite sure what to say to him.

‘I’m sorry, my friend. If I’d known you were there …’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘You did a good job. It’s quite likely things will move faster now.’

‘Does that mean you don’t need me any more?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

Lucien’s wife was watching them through the windows of the herbalist’s shop.

‘For the moment, I have nothing particular for you to do. Maybe it’s time you had a rest and looked after your bronchitis.’

‘It’s only a cold. Thanks, anyway.’

‘Can I drop you somewhere?’

‘No. I’ll take the Métro.’

He just had to emphasize the difference between them, the fact

that they were going off in their car while he was heading for the Métro, where, as it was six o'clock, he would find himself caught up in the rush hour.

'Well done. If you find out anything new, phone me. And I'll keep you up to date.'

When he was again alone in the car with Janvier, Maigret sighed:

'Poor Lognon! I'd have given a lot to arrive after he left.'

'Are you going back to headquarters?'

'No. Drop me off at my apartment.'

It wasn't far. They didn't have time to comment on what they had just learned. Both of them were doubtless thinking about the sixteen-year-old girl who had run away from her mother and had had to hide under a bed every day for months.

The widow Crêmieux had said of her that she was proud and didn't condescend to talk to anyone. Rose, the Larchers' maid, had seen her spend hours, all alone, on a bench on Place de la Trinité. All alone, too, she had gone twice to Mademoiselle Irène's shop. All alone, she had gone to the Roméo and, all alone, finally, she had left there, refusing the offer from a taxi-driver, who had later seen her crossing Place Saint-Augustin in the rain, then reaching Faubourg Saint-Honoré.

After that, there was nothing more but a body lying on the wet pavement of Place Vintimille.

She no longer had the velvet cape or the silver handbag she had borrowed, and one of her high-heeled shoes was missing.

'See you tomorrow, chief.'

'See you tomorrow, Janvier.'

'Any instructions?'

It was impossible to question Jeanine Armenieu, now Madame Santoni, because she was honeymooning in Florence.

'I'm expecting a phone call from Nice this evening.'

There were still lots of blanks to fill in.

And there was someone somewhere who had killed the girl and then moved her body to Place Vintimille.

6.

In which there is talk of a strange father and Maigret's qualms

Over dinner, Madame Maigret talked about the daughter of their next-door neighbour who had gone to the dentist for the first time that day and had said … What in fact had she said? Maigret didn't realize he was only listening with half an ear. He was looking at his wife, whose voice flowed like pleasant music, and she broke off to ask him:

'Don't you think that's funny?'

'You're right, it's very funny.'

His mind had gone blank. It happened to him sometimes. When it did, he looked at people with big eyes that were a little too fixed, and those who weren't familiar with him could not have known that those eyes were only a kind of wall, a backdrop.

Madame Maigret didn't insist. She went to do the washing-up while he sat down in his armchair and opened his newspaper. When the washing-up was over, there was no noise in the apartment, except every now and again the rustling of the paper as he turned the page. Twice, they heard the rain falling outside.

At about ten o'clock, when she saw him carefully fold the newspaper, she hoped for a moment that they would go to bed, but instead he chose a magazine from the pile and started reading again. So she carried on sewing, making the occasional idle comment just to fill the silence. It didn't really matter if he replied or not, or merely grunted something: it made for a nice feeling of

intimacy.

The people on the floor above had switched off their radio and gone to bed.

'Are you waiting for something?'

'I may get a phone call.'

Féret had promised him that he would question Louise's mother again as soon as she got back from Monte Carlo. It was possible that Féret had been detained by another job. On the eve of the Battle of Flowers, they must be busy down there.

Later, Madame Maigret became aware that her husband was forgetting to turn the page. His eyes were still open. She waited for a long time before suggesting:

'Don't you think we should go to bed anyway?'

It was after eleven o'clock. Maigret didn't object but took the telephone into the bedroom with him, connected it and put it on the bedside table.

They undressed and took turns in the bathroom, performing their little nightly rituals. Once he was in bed, Maigret switched off the light, turned to his wife and kissed her.

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight. Try to sleep.'

He was still thinking about Louise Laboine and the other characters who had appeared one after the other, emerging from anonymity to form a kind of procession. The only difference from earlier was that these characters were growing blurred and grotesque and eventually getting all mixed up, playing roles that weren't theirs.

Later still, it seemed to Maigret that he was playing chess, but he was so tired and the game had been going on for so long that he no longer recognized the pieces, taking the queen for a king, the bishops for knights and forgetting where he had placed his rooks. It was nerve-racking, because the commissioner was watching him. The game was vital to Quai des Orfèvres. His opponent, in fact, was none other than Lognon, who had a sarcastic smile on his face and was waiting, sure of himself, for the opportunity to checkmate Maigret.

That mustn't happen. The prestige of the Police Judiciaire was at stake. That was why they were all behind him, watching him: Lucas, Janvier, young Lapointe, Torrence, others still whom he couldn't make out.

‘You whispered something to him!’ Lognon said to someone standing by Maigret’s shoulder. ‘But it doesn’t matter.’

Lognon himself was all alone. There was nobody to help him. If he won, what would people say?

‘Whisper as much as you like. All I ask is that there’s no cheating.’

Why did he think Maigret intended to cheat? Was it something he was in the habit of doing? Had he ever cheated in his life?

As long as he found his queen, which was the key to the game, he’d pull it off. The best thing was to examine the squares again one by one. His queen couldn’t be lost.

The telephone rang. He reached out his arm. It took him a moment to find the light switch.

‘A call from Nice.’

It was 1.10 by the alarm-clock.

‘Is that you, chief?’

‘Just a second, Féret.’

‘I hope it was OK to wake you?’

‘You did the right thing.’

He took a gulp of water. Then, as his pipe was on the bedside table, with some tobacco still in it, he lit it.

‘Right, go ahead.’

‘I didn’t know what to do. Since all I know of the case is what I’ve read in the newspapers, it’s hard for me to judge what’s important and what isn’t.’

‘Did you see the Laboine woman?’

‘I’ve only just left her. She didn’t get back from Monte Carlo until half past eleven. I went to see her where she lives, which is a kind of boarding house. Virtually the only people there seem to be batty old women like her. Strangely enough, they’re almost all ex-actresses. There’s also an ex-circus rider, and the woman in charge, if she’s to be believed, used to be an opera singer. It’s hard to explain how you feel when you’re there. Nobody was in bed. In the evening, those who aren’t at the casino play cards in a drawing room, where everything looks a hundred years old. It’s a bit like being in a wax museum. I must be boring you!’

‘No.’

‘The reason I’m telling you all this is I know you like to see things for yourself, and as you couldn’t come here …’

‘Carry on.’

‘First of all, I know now where she’s from. Her father was a schoolteacher in a village in the Haute-Loire. She left for Paris at the age of eighteen, and for two years was a walk-on at the Châtelet. Eventually, they let her do a few dance steps in *Around the World in Eighty Days* or *Michael Strogoff*. Then she joined the Folies-Bergère. And finally she went on tour with a company to South America, where she stayed for several years. It’s impossible to get any precise dates from her, because she keeps getting confused.

‘Are you still there? I wondered again if she was on drugs. Then when I observed her more closely, I realized that wasn’t it. Basically, she’s not very bright. I think she might not even be like other women.’

‘Has she ever been married?’

‘I’m getting to that. She was in her thirties when she started performing in nightclubs out East. That was before the war. She hung around Bucharest, Sofia, Alexandria. She spent several years in Cairo and apparently even went to Ethiopia.

‘I had to drag this information out of her bit by bit. She was slumped in an armchair, stroking her swollen legs, and after a while she asked me if she could take her corset off. To cut a long story short …’

That reminded Maigret of Jeanine Armenieu’s aunt, Mademoiselle Poré, and her interminable monologue.

Madame Maigret was watching him through half-opened eyes.

‘It was in Istanbul, when she was thirty-eight, that she met a man named Van Cram.’

‘What name did you say?’

‘Julius Van Cram, a Dutchman, it seems. According to her, he looked like a real gentleman and lived at the Pera Palace.’

Maigret had frowned. That name reminded him of something. He didn’t know what, but he was sure this wasn’t the first time he’d heard it.

‘Do you know how old this Van Cram was?’

‘Much older than her. He must have been over fifty at the time, which means that he’d be nearly seventy by now.’

‘Is he dead?’

‘I have no idea. Hold on, I’m trying to tell you things in the right order, so that I don’t forget anything. She showed me a photograph of herself taken at the time. I must say she was still beautiful then, already quite mature, but very attractive with it.’

‘What did this Van Cram do?’

‘She doesn’t seem to have been too concerned about that. He spoke several languages fluently, especially English and French. German, too. He went to embassy receptions. Apparently, he fell in love with her, and they lived together for a while.’

‘At the Pera Palace?’

‘No. He’d rented an apartment not far from the hotel. Sorry, chief, if I can’t be more specific. If you only knew how hard it was to get this information out of her! She kept breaking off to talk about some woman she’d known in some cabaret or other and tell me her story, after which she’d start moaning and saying:

‘ “I know you think I’ve been a bad mother …”

‘In the end, she offered me a glass of liqueur. She may not take drugs, but I think she likes her booze.

‘ “Never before going to the casino!” she said. “And I don’t drink when I’m playing either. Just a small glass afterwards, to get rid of the tension.”

‘According to her, of all human activities, gambling is the most exhausting.

‘To get back to Van Cram. After a few months, she realized she was pregnant. It was the first time it had ever happened to her. She couldn’t believe it. She told Van Cram, assuming that he’d advise her to get rid of the baby.’

‘Was she prepared to do that?’

‘She doesn’t know. The way she talks about it, it was just a bad trick that fate had played on her.

‘ “I could have got pregnant a hundred thousand times before, and it had to happen when I was already thirty-eight!”

‘Those are her words. But Van Cram took it in his stride. After a few weeks, he asked her to marry him.’

‘Where did they get married?’

‘In Istanbul. But that’s where things get complicated. I think she was really in love with him. He took her to an office, she doesn’t know where exactly, where she signed some papers and made her vows. As long as he told her she was married, she believed him. A few days later, he suggested they move to France.’

‘Together?’

‘Yes. They got on an Italian ship bound for Marseille.’

‘Did she have a passport in the name Van Cram?’

‘No. I asked her that. Seems they hadn’t had time to get her

passport changed. They spent two weeks in Marseille, then moved to Nice. That's where the child was born.'

'Were they staying in a hotel?'

'They'd rented quite a nice apartment not far from Promenade des Anglais. Two months later, Van Cram went out to buy cigarettes and didn't come back. She never saw him again.'

'Did she ever hear from him?'

'He wrote to her several times, from all over, London, Copenhagen, Hamburg, New York, and each time he'd send her some money.'

'A lot of money?'

'Sometimes, yes. At other times, almost nothing. He'd always ask her to let him know how she was, and especially how their daughter was.'

'And did she?'

'Yes.'

'I assume she wrote to him poste restante?'

'Yes. That's when she started gambling. Her daughter grew up and went to school.'

'Did she ever see her father?'

'She was two months old when he left, and he hasn't been back to France since, at least as far as his wife knows. The last money order he sent her, a year ago, was for a fairly large amount, but she lost it all in one night.'

'Has Van Cram ever asked her where his daughter was? Does he know she left Nice for Paris?'

'Yes. Only the mother didn't know the girl's address.'

'Is that all, my friend?'

'Pretty much. I didn't get the impression she was being completely honest when she said she didn't know how her husband made his living … Oh, I almost forgot the main thing. When she had to renew her identity card a few years ago, she wanted to have the name Van Cram put on it. She was asked for her marriage licence. She showed them the only document she had, which was written in Turkish. They examined it carefully and sent it to the Turkish consulate. Eventually, they told her the document was worthless and that she definitely wasn't married.'

'Was she upset?'

'No. Nothing seems to upset her, except maybe seeing the red come up twelve times when she's betting solidly on black. Listening

to her, you get the feeling you're dealing with a person who isn't quite real. She doesn't live in the same world as us. When I talked to her about her daughter, she didn't show the slightest emotion. All she said was:

' "I hope for her sake she didn't suffer too much …" '

'I assume you're going to bed now?'

'Unfortunately not! I have to rush over to Juan-les-Pins, where someone's just been nabbed for cheating at the casino. Do you need me any more, chief?'

'Not for the moment. Hold on a minute. Did she show you a photograph of her ex-husband?'

'I asked her for one. Seems she only ever owned one, which she took without his knowledge, because he hated having his photograph taken. When her daughter left for Paris, she must have taken it with her, because it went missing.'

'Thanks.'

Maigret hung up. Instead of putting his head on the pillow and switching off the light, he got out of bed and went and filled another pipe.

The widow Crêmieux had mentioned a picture her lodger had kept in her wallet, and he had been too focused on the girl herself to think much about it.

He stood there in his pyjamas, barefoot in his slippers. His wife avoided asking him any questions. Perhaps because of his dream, he was thinking about Lognon. Hadn't he said to him earlier, without really thinking about it, 'I'll keep you up to date'?

Well, the existence of Julius Van Cram might change the course of the investigation.

'I'll call him tomorrow morning,' he said under his breath.

'What's that?'

'Nothing. I was talking to myself.'

He looked for the number of Lognon's apartment on Place Constantin-Pecqueur. This way, he couldn't be blamed.

'Hello? May I talk to your husband, please? I'm sorry if I woke you, but—'

'I wasn't sleeping. I never sleep more than an hour or two a night.'

It was Madame Lognon, her voice both sharp and whining.

'This is Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.'

'I recognized your voice.'

‘I’d like to have a word with your husband.’

‘I thought he was with you. At least, he told me he was working for you.’

‘What time did he go out?’

‘Straight after dinner. He ate quickly and then left. He told me he’d probably be out all night.’

‘Did he tell you where he was going?’

‘He never tells me.’

‘Thank you, I’m very grateful.’

‘Isn’t it true that he’s working for you?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Then how come you don’t know—’

‘I don’t necessarily know every move he makes.’

She wasn’t convinced, suspecting him of lying to cover for her husband. She was probably about to ask him more questions, so he hung up. Immediately, he called the station in the second district. An officer named Ledent answered.

‘Is Lognon there?’

‘He hasn’t set foot in his office all night.’

‘Thanks, anyway. If he comes in, tell him to call me at home.’

‘Got it, Monsieur Maigret.’

An unpleasant thought occurred to him, rather like in his dream. It bothered him suddenly to know that Lognon was outside, and that he, Maigret, didn’t have a clue as to what he was doing. There was no point continuing to make inquiries in the nightclubs or question the taxi-drivers. It was obvious there was nothing more to be found out at the Roméo.

And yet Lognon was spending the night on the trail of something. Could it be that he had discovered a new lead?

Maigret wasn’t jealous of his colleagues, let alone his inspectors. Whenever a case was solved satisfactorily, it was almost always to them that he gave the credit. He seldom made statements to the press. That very afternoon, it was Lucas he had entrusted with the task of talking to the reporters accredited to Quai des Orfèvres.

But this particular instance put him in a bad mood. Yes, it was true: just like in the chess game in his dream, Lognon was on his own, whereas Maigret had the entire organization of the Police Judiciaire on his side, not to mention the provincial flying squads and the whole of the police machine.

This thought embarrassed him, but he was nevertheless tempted

to get dressed and go to headquarters. He had work to do there, now that he knew whose photograph it was that Louise Laboine had stolen from her mother and jealously preserved.

His wife watched him go into the dining room, open the sideboard and pour himself a small glass of sloe gin.

'Aren't you coming back to bed?'

Logically, he ought to go. His instinct was urging him to do so. The only reason he didn't was to give Lognon his chance and to punish himself for having such bad thoughts.

'This case seems to be bothering you.'

'It's quite complicated.'

The strange thing, though, was that so far it wasn't the killer he'd been thinking about, but the victim. The whole investigation had centred on her. Now that at last he knew her a little better, he could start asking himself who had killed her.

What could Lognon possibly be doing? He went to the window and looked out. The moon was full, the sky calm. It had stopped raining. The rooftops were glistening.

He emptied his pipe, got heavily into bed and kissed his wife.

'Wake me up at the usual time.'

This time, his sleep was dreamless. When he drank his coffee, sitting up in bed, the sun was shining. Lognon hadn't phoned, which seemed to suggest that he hadn't been to his office and hadn't gone home either.

At headquarters, he attended the daily briefing without participating in the conversation and, as soon as it was over, climbed the stairs to Records. There, on kilometres of shelving, stood the files of all those who had had dealings with the law. The clerk wore grey overalls that made him look like a warehouseman, and the air smelled of old paper, like a public library.

'Can you see if you have anything on a man named Van Cram, Julius Van Cram?'

'How recent?'

'Maybe twenty years ago or more.'

'Will you wait?'

Maigret sat down. Ten minutes later, the clerk brought him a file on someone named Van Cram, but this was a Joseph Van Cram, who had worked for an insurance company in Rue de Grenelle in Paris and had been sentenced two years earlier for forgery and the use of forgeries. Plus, he was only twenty-eight.

‘No other Van Crams?’

‘Only a Von Kramm, with a *k* and two *m*s, and he died in Cologne twenty-four years ago.’

There were other files, on a lower level, devoted not only to those who had been sentenced for crimes, but to all those the police had had to deal with at one time or another. Van Cram the insurance clerk and Von Kramm from Cologne were here, too.

Studying the list of international adventurers and eliminating all those who hadn’t lived in the Middle East and whose age didn’t match that of Madame Laboine’s husband, Maigret ended up with just a few files, including one that contained the comment:

> Hans Ziegler, alias Ernst Marek, alias John Donley, alias Joey Hogan, alias Jean Lemke (his real name and background are unknown). Specializes in confidence tricks. Speaks fluent French, English, German, Dutch, Italian and Spanish, and a little Polish.

It was the Prague police, thirty years earlier, that had circulated internationally the photograph of a man named Hans Ziegler, who, with the help of an accomplice, had obtained a large sum of money under false pretences. Hans Ziegler claimed to have been born in Munich. In those days, he had had a blond moustache.

In London, soon afterwards, the same man had been known as John Donley, born in San Francisco. In Copenhagen, he had been arrested under the name Ernst Marek.

He was later seen elsewhere under other names: Joey Hogan, Jules Stieb, Carl Spangler.

His appearance also changed with the years. At first, he was a tall, thin but solidly built man. With time, he had acquired a paunch as well as a certain dignity.

He dressed well and took care of his appearance. In Paris, he lived in a grand hotel on the Champs-Élysées, in London at the Savoy. Everywhere he went, he frequented the most select places. Everywhere, too, his activities never varied. He employed a technique that had long since been perfected by others but which he practised with rare virtuosity.

There were two of them, working together, but nothing was known about his accomplice, apart from the fact that he was younger and had a Central European accent.

In an elegant bar they would choose a victim, someone well-to-do, preferably a provincial industrialist or merchant.

After a few drinks with his victim, Jean Lemke, or Jules Stieb, or

John Donley, as the case might be, would complain that he didn't know the country.

'I absolutely need to find someone I can trust,' he would say. 'I've been given an assignment I find somewhat tricky. I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to pull it off. I'm so afraid of being taken for a ride!'

The next part might vary a little, but the basics remained the same. A very rich old lady, preferably an American if this was in Europe, had entrusted him with a large sum of money to be distributed among a certain number of deserving people. He had the money upstairs in his room, in cash. How, in a country he didn't know, could he judge who was worthy and who wasn't?

Oh, yes. The old lady had specified that part of the sum – a third, for example, or a quarter – could be set aside to cover expenses.

Would his new friend – because he was a friend, wasn't he, and clearly an honest man – agree to help him? Of course, the third in question would be shared with him … And that was a tidy sum in itself.

Naturally, he had to be cautious, and felt honour bound to demand a number of guarantees … If his friend could just deposit a certain amount in the bank, to prove his good faith …

'Wait for me … Or, better still, come up to my suite …'

The banknotes were there. There was a briefcase full of them, in impressive bundles.

'We take them with us, drop by your bank, you withdraw the sum of …'

This varied according to the country.

'Then we deposit it in my account, and I hand over the case. All you have to do then is distribute the contents, after you've taken off your share …'

In the taxi, the case with the banknotes would be between the two of them. The victim would withdraw the required amount. Outside his own bank, generally a large bank in the centre of town, Lemke, alias Stieb, alias Ziegler, etc. would leave the case in his companion's care.

'I won't be long …'

He'd rush inside with the victim's money. The victim would never see him again and would soon discover that the banknotes, apart from those on top of the piles, were only newspaper.

Most of the time, when the man had been arrested, he had

nothing compromising in his possession. The stolen money had disappeared, spirited away by an accomplice to whom he had passed it in the crowd filling the bank.

In one file, just one, sent by the Danish police, there was this comment:

> According to information we have been unable to verify, this man appears in fact to be a Dutch citizen named Julius Van Cram, born in Groningen. The son of a good family, Van Cram was working, by about the age of twenty-two, in a bank in Amsterdam of which his father was the director. He already spoke several languages, had received an excellent education and frequented the Yacht Club of Amsterdam.
>
> He disappeared two years later. After a few weeks, it was discovered that he had made away with some of the bank's funds.

Unfortunately, it had been impossible to get hold of any photographs of this Van Cram. They didn't have his fingerprints either.

By comparing dates, Maigret made another interesting discovery. Unlike most criminals and conmen, this man seldom worked twice in quick succession. He would take weeks, sometimes months, to prepare one of his swindles, which always involved a large sum.

After which, several years generally went by before he turned up in some other part of the world, again playing his game with the same skill, the same attention to detail.

Didn't that suggest that he waited until he was low on funds before he started again? Did he keep something aside for a rainy day? Did he have a nest egg hidden away somewhere?

His last exploit had taken place six years before, in Mexico.

'Will you come here a moment, Lucas?'

Lucas looked in surprise at the files cluttering the desk.

'I'd like you to send off a number of telegrams. Before that, I want you to send someone to see the widow Crêmieux in Rue de Clichy and check if this is the same man whose photograph she saw in her lodger's handbag.'

He gave the list of the countries where the man had operated, with the names under which he had been known in each one.

'I also want you to phone Féret in Nice. He needs to go back to Madame Laboine and try to get from her the dates and places of origin of the money orders she received. I don't suppose she kept the stubs, but it's worth a try.' He broke off suddenly. 'Any news

from Lognon?'

'Was he supposed to phone?'

'I don't know. Can you call his apartment?'

He got Madame Lognon at the other end of the line.

'Is your husband back?'

'Not yet. You still don't know where he is?'

She was getting worried, and now so was he.

'I assume,' he said to reassure her, 'that the person he's tailing has left Paris.'

He had spoken about Lognon tailing someone just in case and now had to endure Madame Lognon's complaints that her husband was always given the most thankless, most dangerous assignments.

How could he tell her that, whenever Lognon had got into a sticky situation, he had done it on his own initiative, usually by going against the orders he had received?

He so much wanted to do well, had such a desire to distinguish himself, that he just put his head down and charged straight ahead, convinced, each time, that he was finally going to prove his worth.

Everyone acknowledged his worth. He was the only one who didn't know that.

Maigret called the second district. They hadn't heard from Lognon there either.

'Has anyone seen him locally?'

'Not that I've heard.'

Next door, Lucas, who had sent an inspector to Rue de Clichy, was busy phoning his telegrams. Janvier was standing in the doorway, waiting for Maigret to hang up so that he could ask for instructions.

'I think Detective Chief Inspector Priollet wants to see you. He came by earlier, but you weren't in your office.'

'I was upstairs.'

Maigret went to see Priollet, who was busy interrogating a drug dealer with pinched nostrils and red circles round his eyes.

'I don't know if this is still of any interest to you, or if you've had the information through other channels. I was told this morning that Jeanine Armenieu lived for quite a long time in an apartment in Rue de Ponthieu.'

'Do you have the number?'

'No. It's not far from Rue de Berri, and there's a bar on the ground floor.'

‘Thanks. Anything on Santoni?’

‘Nothing. I don’t think he’s done anything crooked. Right now, he’s living love’s young dream in Florence.’

Maigret went back to Janvier in his office.

‘Get your hat and coat.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘Rue de Ponthieu.’

They would probably find out a little bit more about his dead girl. She remained at the forefront of his mind. Only, that damned Lognon was starting to play a major role. Unfortunately, it was a role they knew nothing about.

‘Whoever said, “Above all, not too much zeal” was damned right,’ Maigret muttered as he put on his coat.

It wasn’t very likely that Lognon was still pounding the streets, going from one address to another. The previous day, at five o’clock, as far as they could judge – and, with him, it was never easy to judge – he hadn’t had any leads.

He had gone home for dinner, then left again immediately.

Before going out, Maigret put his head round the door of the inspectors’ office.

‘I’d like someone to phone the railway stations, just in case, and make sure Lognon hasn’t taken a train.’

Following someone, for example. It was possible. In which case, he might not have had the opportunity to call either headquarters or his own office.

In which case, too, he had information the others didn’t have.

‘Shall we go, chief?’

‘Let’s go.’

Glumly, Maigret stopped the car on Place Dauphine in order to have a drink.

It wasn’t true that he was jealous of Lognon. If Lognon tracked down Louise Laboine’s killer, all the better. If he arrested him, bravo!

But, damn it, he could have told them where he was, like anybody else.

7.

About an inspector who forges ahead and a girl who has an appointment with fate

While Janvier entered the building to make inquiries, Maigret stood at the kerb with his hands in his pockets, thinking that Rue de Ponthieu was a little like the backstage area of the Champs-Élysées, or like its service stairs. Every major thoroughfare in Paris has, often parallel to it, a narrower, more animated street filled with small bars and food shops, restaurants frequented by drivers, cheap hotels, hairdresser's shops and small tradesmen.

There was a bistro, for example, that Maigret would have loved to try out, and was probably about to do so when Janvier came back out.

'This is the place, chief!'

They had got the right building at their first attempt. The lodge was no brighter than most lodges in Paris, but the concierge was young and attractive, and a baby was romping about in a playpen of varnished wood.

'You're also police, aren't you?'

'Why do you say also?'

'Because someone from the police came last night. I was just going to bed. He was a little man who looked so sad that before I noticed that he had a cold, I thought he'd lost his wife and was crying.'

It was hard not to smile at this description of Lognon.

‘What time was that?’

‘About ten. I was busy undressing behind the screen and I had to keep him waiting. Have you come about the same thing?’

‘I assume he asked you about Mademoiselle Armenieu?’

‘And her friend, yes, the one who was murdered.’

‘Did you recognize her photograph in the newspaper?’

‘I thought I did.’

‘Was she a tenant here?’

‘Please sit down, gentlemen. Do you mind if I carry on making the little one’s lunch? If you’re too hot, don’t mind me, you can take off your coats. Aren’t you from the same department as the man yesterday? I don’t know why I’m asking you that. It’s none of my business. As I told your colleague, the real tenant, the one whose name was on the lease, was Mademoiselle Armenieu, Mademoiselle Jeanine, as I called her. She’s married now. It was in the papers. Did you know that?’

Maigret nodded. ‘Did she live here long?’

‘About two years. When she arrived, she was still young and awkward and she often came to me to ask for advice.’

‘Did she have a job?’

‘At the time, she was a typist in an office not very far from here, I don’t know where exactly. She took the little apartment on the third floor. It looks out on the courtyard, but it’s pretty.’

‘And her friend wasn’t living with her?’

‘Yes, she was. Only, as I said, she was the one paying the rent, and the lease was in her name.’

All she wanted was to talk. It was all the easier for her because she had already given out this information the day before.

‘I already know what you’re going to ask me. They left about six months ago. More exactly, Mademoiselle Jeanine left first.’

‘I thought the apartment was in her name?’

‘Yes. The month was almost up. There were still three or four days to go. One evening, Mademoiselle Jeanine came and sat down just where you’re sitting now and said, “I’ve had enough, Madame Marcelle. This time, I’ve decided to have done with it.” ’

‘To have done with what?’ Maigret asked.

‘With the other girl, her friend Louise.’

‘Didn’t they get on?’

‘That’s what I’m trying to explain. Mademoiselle Louise never stopped for a chat, and I know almost nothing about her, except

through her friend, which means I only ever heard part of the story. In the early days, I thought they were sisters, or cousins, or childhood friends. Then Mademoiselle Jeanine told me they'd only met on a train two or three months earlier.'

'Didn't they like each other?'

'Yes and no. It's hard to say. I've seen quite a few girls that age pass through here. We have two of them now, dancers at the Lido. Another one's a manicurist at Claridges. Most tell me their stories, their little problems. After a few days, Mademoiselle Jeanine did the same. But the other one, Louise, never confided in me. For a long time I thought she was proud, then I wondered if it wasn't shyness on her part, and that's what I'm still inclined to believe.

'You see, these girls, when they arrive in Paris and feel lost in the middle of millions of people, either they try to impress, they brag, they blow their own trumpets, or else they withdraw into themselves.

'Mademoiselle Jeanine was definitely the first kind. Nothing scared her. She went out almost every evening. After a few weeks, she'd come back at two or three in the morning and she'd learned how to dress. She hadn't been here even three months when I'd hear her at night, going upstairs with a man.

'It was none of my business. She was at home. This isn't a boarding house.'

'Did each girl have her own room?'

'Yes, of course! All the same, Louise must have heard everything, and in the morning she'd have to wait for the man to leave before she could wash or use the kitchen.'

'Is that what caused arguments between them?'

'I'm not sure. A lot of things happen in two years, and I have twenty-two tenants in the building. I couldn't have predicted that one of them would get herself murdered.'

'What does your husband do?'

'He's head waiter in a restaurant on Place des Ternes. Does it bother you if I give the little one his food?'

She sat the baby down in his chair and started feeding him, one mouthful at a time, without losing the thread of her thoughts.

'I told all this last night to your colleague, and he took notes. If you want my opinion, I'll tell you this: Mademoiselle Jeanine knew what she wanted and was determined to get it, whatever it took. She didn't go out with just anybody. Most of the men she brought

here had their own cars. I'd see them parked outside in the morning when I took out the dustbins. They weren't necessarily young. They weren't old either. What I'm trying to say is that it wasn't only for the pleasure.

'Whenever she asked me questions, I could see what she was after. For example, if a man invited her to dinner in a restaurant she didn't know, she was determined to find out if it was a smart restaurant or not, how you should dress to go there and so on.

'It didn't take her more than six months to get to know a certain side of Paris like the back of her hand.'

'Did her friend ever go with her?'

'Only when they went to the cinema.'

'How did Louise spend her evenings?'

'Most of the time, she stayed upstairs. Sometimes, she went for a walk, but never very far. It's as if she was scared.

'They were almost the same age but compared to Mademoiselle Jeanine, Mademoiselle Louise was a little girl.

'That's what got on Mademoiselle Jeanine's nerves sometimes. She said to me once, "If only I'd been able to sleep on the train instead of chatting to her!"

'All the same, especially at the start, I'm sure she was pleased to have someone to talk to. You may have noticed that girls who come to seek their fortune in Paris almost always pair up.

'Then, little by little, they start to hate each other.

'That's what happened, and it happened quickly in their case, because Mademoiselle Louise couldn't adapt and never stayed more than a few weeks in one place.

'She wasn't very well educated. Apparently, she made spelling mistakes, and that stopped her from working in an office. When she was hired as a shop assistant somewhere, something unpleasant would always happen to her. Either it was the boss, or a department manager who wanted to sleep with her.

'Instead of being clever and making it clear to them that she wasn't like that, she'd get on her high horse, slap them or slam the door and walk out. Once, there were some thefts in the shop where she worked, and she was the one they suspected, even though I'm sure she was innocent.

'Mind you, I heard all this from her friend. All I really know is that there were times when Mademoiselle Louise didn't work and went out later than usual to check out jobs she'd seen advertised.'

‘Did they have their meals upstairs?’

‘Almost always. Except when Mademoiselle Jeanine ate out with friends. Last year, they both went to spend a week in Deauville. Or rather, they left together, but Louise came back first, and Jeanine didn’t get back until several days later. I don’t know what happened there. For a while, they didn’t talk to each other, even though they were living in the same apartment.’

‘Did Louise get any mail?’

‘Never any personal letters. I even thought she was an orphan. Her friend told me that she had a mother, in the South, a half-mad woman who didn’t care about her daughter. Occasionally, when Mademoiselle Louise answered an ad in writing, she’d get a few letters on headed paper, and I knew what that meant.’

‘And Jeanine?’

‘A letter from Lyon every two or three weeks. From her father, who’s a widower down there. Then mainly pneumatics, to arrange dates.’

‘How long ago was it that Jeanine told you she wanted to be rid of her friend?’

‘She started talking about it more than a year ago, maybe a year and a half, but it was always when they’d had a quarrel, or when Louise had lost her job again. Jeanine would sigh:

‘ “To think I left my father in order to be free, and now I’m stuck with that dope!”

‘The next day or the day after that, she was pleased to see her again, I’m convinced of that. It was a bit like in a marriage. I suppose you’re both married?’

‘Jeanine Armenieu gave notice six months ago, is that right?’

‘Yes. She’d changed a lot lately. She dressed better, I mean in more expensive clothes, and went to places a cut above those she’d gone to before. Sometimes she was away for two or three days. She’d receive flowers, boxes of chocolates from Marquise de Sévigné. I knew what was going on.

‘Anyway, one evening she came and sat down in the lodge and said to me:

‘ “This time, I’m going for good, Madame Marcelle. I have nothing against this place, but I can’t go on living with that girl for ever.”

‘ “Are you getting married?” I said as a joke.

‘She didn’t laugh, but said:

‘ “Not immediately. When it happens, you’ll find out from the newspapers.”

‘She must already have met Monsieur Santoni by then. She was very sure of herself, and her little smile said it all.

‘ “Will you invite me to the wedding?” I asked, still joking.

‘ “I can’t promise to invite you, but I’ll send you a nice present.” ’

‘And did she?’ Maigret asked.

‘Not yet. She probably will. But anyway, she got what she wanted, and now she’s spending her honeymoon in Italy. To get back to that evening, she told me she was leaving without saying anything to her friend and that she’d make sure her friend didn’t find her.

‘ “Otherwise, she’ll just keep clinging to me!”

‘She did what she said she would. She waited until Louise had gone and then set off with her two suitcases. She didn’t even leave me a forwarding address, just to be on the safe side.

‘ “I’ll drop by from time to time to see if there’s any mail for me.” ’

‘Did you see her again?’

‘Three or four times. Anyway, there was still a few days’ rent already paid. The last morning, Mademoiselle Louise came to see me and told me she was forced to leave. I admit I felt sorry for her. She didn’t cry, but her lips were quivering, and I could see how helpless she was. The only luggage she had was a little blue suitcase. I asked her where she was going, and she said she had no idea.

‘ “If you want to stay a few more days, until I find another tenant …”

‘ “Thanks very much, but I prefer not to …”

‘That was just like her. I watched her walk away down the street, with her suitcase in her hand, and when she turned the corner, I felt like calling her back to give her a little money.’

‘Did she also come back to see you?’

‘She came back, but not to see me. It was to ask me for her friend’s address. I told her I didn’t know it. I don’t think she believed me.’

‘Why did she want to find her?’

‘Probably to make it up with her, or to ask her for money. From the state of her clothes, it was easy to see things weren’t going well for her.’

‘When was she last here?’

‘Just over a month ago. I’d just been reading the paper, and it was still on the table. I probably shouldn’t have done what I did.

‘ “I don’t know where she’s living,” I told her, “but as it happens, they’re talking about her in the gossip columns.”

‘It was true. It said something like: “Marco Santoni, the vermouth heir, seen every evening at Maxim’s with a stunning model, Jeanine Armenieu.” ’

Maigret looked at Janvier, who had understood. One month earlier, Louise Laboine had gone for the first time to Rue de Douai to hire an evening dress from Mademoiselle Irène. Wasn’t it because she intended to go to Maxim’s to see her friend?

‘Do you know if she saw her?’

‘She didn’t. Mademoiselle Jeanine came a few days later, and, when I asked her, she started laughing:

‘ “We do often dine at Maxim’s, but not every evening,” she said. “Besides, I doubt they’d let poor Louise in.” ’

‘Did you tell all this to the inspector who came last night?’ Maigret asked.

‘Maybe not in such detail, because there are some things I’ve only remembered since.’

‘Did you tell him anything else?’

Maigret was trying to figure out what it was, in what he had just learned, that could have provided Lognon with a lead. The previous day, at ten in the evening, he had been in this same concierge’s lodge. That was the last time anyone had seen him.

‘Will you give me a moment to put my son to bed?’

She gave the baby a quick wash, changed him on the table and went with him into a kind of alcove, where they heard her whispering tenderly.

When she returned, she seemed a little more anxious.

‘I wonder now if what happened isn’t my fault. If only these girls didn’t make such a mystery of things, it’d be so easy! I can understand Mademoiselle Jeanine not giving me her address so as not to be bothered by her friend. But the other one, Mademoiselle Louise, she could have given me hers.

‘About ten days ago, maybe a little more, I don’t know exactly, a man came and asked me if a girl named Louise Laboine lived here.

‘I told him she didn’t, that she’d left several months ago but was still living in Paris, that I didn’t know her address, and that she

came to see me from time to time.'

'What kind of man was he?'

'A foreigner. By his accent, I'd have said an Englishman or an American. Not someone rich or elegant. A thin little man who, come to think of it, looked a bit like the inspector yesterday. I don't know why he made me think of a clown.

'He seemed disappointed and kept asking if I was expecting to see her soon.

' "Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a month," I told him.

' "I'll leave her a note."

'He sat down at the table, asked for paper and an envelope and started writing in pencil. I slipped the letter into an empty pigeon-hole and forgot all about it.

'When he came back three days later, the letter was still there, and he looked even more disappointed.

' "I'm not going to be able to wait much longer," he said. "I have to leave soon."

'I asked him if it was important and he replied:

' "For her, yes. Very important."

'He took back the letter and wrote another one. This time he took his time about it, as if he'd been forced to make a decision. When he finished, he sighed as he handed it to me.'

'Did you see him again?'

'Only the next day. Three days later, in the afternoon, Mademoiselle Jeanine paid me a visit. She was very excited.

' "You'll soon be reading about me in the newspapers," she said.

'She'd just been shopping locally and she was weighed down with little packages that came from the best shops.

'I told her about the letter for Mademoiselle Louise and about the visits from the thin little man. "If only I knew where to find her …"

'She seemed to think this over. "Why don't you give it to me?" she said in the end. "If I know Louise, it won't take her long to come and see me. As soon as she finds out from the newspapers where I am …"

'I hesitated. But then I thought she was probably right.'

'So you gave her the letter?'

'Yes. She looked at the envelope and stuffed it in her bag. It was only on her way out that she said to me:

' "You'll be getting your present soon, Madame Marcelle!" '

Maigret was silent, head bowed, staring down at the floor.

‘Is that everything you told the inspector?’

‘I think so. Yes. I’m trying to think. I don’t know what else I could have told him.’

‘Did Louise ever show up after that?’

‘No.’

‘So she didn’t know her former friend had a letter for her?’

‘I suppose not. She certainly didn’t hear it from me.’

Maigret had just discovered much more in a quarter of an hour than he had expected. Only, the trail stopped abruptly.

It was about Lognon, even more than about Louise Laboine, that he was thinking, as if Inspector Hard-Done-By had suddenly started playing the main role.

He had come here, had heard the same story.

After which, he had disappeared from circulation.

Anyone else knowing what he knew would have phoned Maigret the previous evening to pass on the information and ask for instructions. Not Lognon! He was determined to see it through to the end, all by himself.

‘You seem worried,’ the concierge remarked.

‘I don’t suppose the inspector told you anything, expressed any opinion?’

‘No. He thanked me and left. He turned right when he got outside.’

What else to do but thank her, too, and leave? Without consulting Janvier, Maigret drew him into the bistro he had noticed earlier, ordered two Pernods and drank his in silence.

‘Can you phone the second district and find out if they’ve heard from him? Then call his wife, in case the office doesn’t know anything. Finally, make sure he hasn’t got in contact with headquarters.’

When Janvier came out of the booth, Maigret was slowly drinking a second aperitif.

‘Nothing!’

‘The only explanation I can think of is that he phoned Italy.’

‘Are you going to?’

‘Yes. We’ll get through more quickly from the office.’

By the time they got there, almost everyone had left for lunch. Maigret asked for a list of hotels in Florence, chose the most luxurious ones and struck it lucky with the third one. Yes, the Santonis were staying there. They weren’t in their suite, which they

had left half an hour earlier to go down to the hotel restaurant for lunch.

It was there that he was able to reach them shortly afterwards. Fortunately, the head waiter had worked in Paris and knew a little French.

'Could you ask Madame Santoni to come to the phone?'

When the head waiter had performed his errand, it was a man's voice, an aggressive one, that Maigret heard.

'Do you mind telling me what this is all about?'

'Who am I speaking to?'

'Marco Santoni. Last night, we were woken up on the pretext that the Paris police needed some urgent information, and now you won't even let us eat in peace.'

'I apologize, Monsieur Santoni. I'm Detective Chief Inspector Maigret of the Police Judiciaire.'

'That still doesn't tell me what my wife has to do with—'

'This isn't really about her. It just so happens that an old friend of hers has been murdered.'

'That's what the man last night told us. But what of it? Is that any reason to—'

'Your wife was given a letter to keep. This letter would probably help us to—'

'But is it absolutely necessary to phone twice? She told the inspector everything she knew.'

'The inspector has disappeared.'

'Oh!' His anger subsided. 'In that case, let me get my wife. I hope you'll leave us in peace after that and avoid her name getting in the papers.'

There was some whispering. Jeanine must have been in the booth with her husband.

'I'm listening!' she said.

'I'm sorry to bother you, madame. You already know what this is about. The concierge in Rue de Ponthieu gave you a letter addressed to Louise.'

'I'm sorry I ever agreed to take it!'

'What happened to the letter?'

There was a silence, and for a moment Maigret thought he had been cut off.

'Did you give it to her on the night of your wedding, when she came to see you at the Roméo?'

‘Of course not. I didn’t have the letter with me at my wedding.’

‘Was it because of that letter that Louise went to see you?’

Another silence, like a hesitation.

‘No. She’d never even heard of it.’

‘What did she want?’

‘To borrow money, of course. She told me she was broke, that her landlady had thrown her out and she implied that the last option open to her was to kill herself. Not as clearly as that. With Louise, nothing is ever clear.’

‘Did you give her any money?’

‘Three or four thousand-franc notes. I didn’t count them.’

‘Did you tell her about the letter?’

‘Yes.’

‘What exactly did you tell her?’

‘I told her what was in it.’

‘You mean you’d read it?’

‘Yes.’

Another silence.

‘Believe me, it wasn’t out of curiosity. I wasn’t even the one who opened it. Marco found it in my bag. I told him the story, and he didn’t believe me. I told him:

‘ “Open it. You’ll see.” ’

In a low voice, she spoke to her husband, who was still in the booth. ‘Be quiet,’ she said. ‘It’s best to tell the truth. They’ll find out anyway.’

‘Do you remember the contents?’

‘Not word for word. It was badly written, in not very good French, full of spelling mistakes. It basically said: “I have a very important message for you and I need to see you urgently. Ask for Fred at Pickwick’s Bar in Rue de l’Étoile. That’s me. If I’m not there, the barman will tell you where to find me.” Are you still there, inspector?’

Maigret was taking notes.

‘Carry on.’

‘The letter continued: “I may not be able to stay in France much longer. If I have to go, I’ll leave the document with the barman. He’ll ask you to prove your identity. You’ll understand why.” ’

‘Is that all?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you told all this to Louise?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did she seem to understand?’

‘Not immediately. Then she seemed to think of something and she said thank you and left.’

‘You didn’t hear from her again that night?’

‘No. How could I have? It was only two days later, going through the newspaper by chance, that I found out she was dead.’

‘Do you think she went to Pickwick’s Bar?’

‘It’s quite likely, don’t you think? What would you have done?’

‘Did anybody know about this apart from you and your husband?’

‘I don’t know. The letter was in my bag for two or three days.’

‘This is when you were living at the Hôtel Washington?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you get any visitors there?’

‘Only Marco.’

‘Where’s the letter now?’

‘I must have put it away with some other papers.’

‘Are your things still in the hotel?’

‘Certainly not. I took them to Marco’s the day before the wedding, except for my toiletries and a few clothes that the manservant went to fetch the same day. Do you think it’s because of that message that she died?’

‘It’s possible. Did she say anything about it?’

‘No, nothing at all.’

‘Did she ever talk to you about her father?’

‘I asked her one day who the photograph was of that she kept in her wallet, and she told me it was a picture of her father.

‘ “Is he still alive?” I pressed her.

‘She looked at me like someone who doesn’t feel like talking and prefers to keep things quiet, so I didn’t ask anything more. Another time, when we were talking about our parents, I asked her:

‘ “What does your father do?”

‘She looked at me the same way, without saying a word, that’s the way she was. She’s dead now, and I know we shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but …’

Her husband must have silenced her.

‘I’ve told you everything I know.’

‘I’m very grateful. When are you planning to be back in Paris?’

‘In a week.’

Janvier had followed the conversation on a second receiver.

‘Seems to me we’ve just discovered Lognon’s lead,’ he said with a thin smile.

‘Do you know Pickwick’s Bar?’

‘I’ve passed it, but I’ve never gone in.’

‘Neither have I. Are you hungry?’

‘More curious than hungry.’

Maigret opened the door to the next office.

‘Any news of Lognon?’ he asked Lucas.

‘Nothing, chief.’

‘If he calls you, you can reach me at Pickwick’s Bar in Rue de l’Étoile.’

‘I just had a visitor, chief, the manageress of a rooming house in Rue d’Aboukir. It took her a while to make her mind up. Apparently she’s been so busy the last few days she didn’t read the newspaper. To cut a long story short, she came to tell us that Louise Laboine lived in her establishment for four months.’

‘When was this?’

‘Recently. She left it two months ago.’

‘In other words, when she moved to Rue de Clichy.’

‘Yes. She was working as a sales assistant in a store on Boulevard Magenta. It’s one of those stores that have a bargain section outside on the pavement. The girl spent part of the winter there, ended up catching bronchitis and had to stay in her room for a week.’

‘Who looked after her?’

‘Nobody. Her room was on the top floor, a kind of attic. The house is a pretty low-class place, mainly used by North Africans.’

Most of the blanks had been filled in now. It was becoming possible to reconstruct the girl’s whole story from the day she had left her mother in Nice to the night she had gone to see Jeanine at the Roméo.

‘Are you coming, Janvier?’

All they still had to do was reconstruct her whereabouts for about two hours on the last night.

The taxi-driver had seen her on Place Saint-Augustin, then on the corner of Boulevard Haussmann and Faubourg Saint-Honoré, still walking in the direction of the Arc de Triomphe.

That was the route to take if you wanted to get to Rue de l’Étoile.

Louise, who had never been good at organizing her own life, who had placed all her hopes in a girl she had met by chance on a train, had been walking quickly, all alone in the light rain, as if in a hurry

to meet her fate.

8.

In which everything happens between people who know what it means to talk and in which Inspector Hard-Done-By once again features

The front of the bar, between a cobbler's shop and a laundry where women could be seen ironing, was so narrow that most people probably passed it without suspecting there was a bar there at all. It was impossible to see inside, because the windows were made out of the bottoms of green bottles, and the door, concealed by a dark red curtain, had an old-fashioned lantern over it, on which the words *Pickwick's Bar* were painted in something resembling Gothic lettering.

Once through the door, a transformation took place in Maigret, who seemed to grow harder, more impersonal, and Janvier unconsciously adopted the same manner.

Inside, the bar was deserted. The room was long and narrow, and because of the green bottles in the windows and the narrowness of the entrance, it was dark, with just the occasional gleam of light on the woodwork.

A man in shirt-sleeves had stood up when they came in and seemed to be putting something down, probably a sandwich he had been eating out of sight behind the bar when the door had opened.

His mouth still full, he watched them advance without saying a word, his face completely inscrutable. He had very black, almost blue hair, thick eyebrows that gave him a stubborn air and a dimple in his chin as deep as a scar.

Maigret seemed to barely look at him, but it was obvious they had recognized each other. This wasn't the first time they had faced one another. He walked slowly to one of the high stools and sat down on it, unbuttoning his coat and pushing his hat back on his head. Janvier did the same.

After a silence, the barman asked:

'What can I get you?'

Maigret looked hesitantly at Janvier. 'What about you?'

'I'll have what you're having.'

'Two Pernods, if you have them.'

Albert served them, put a carafe of iced water down on the counter and waited. For a while, it looked as if they were going to play the game of seeing who could keep silent the longest.

It was Maigret who broke the silence. 'What time did Lognon come here?'

'I didn't know his name was Lognon. I always heard him called Inspector Hard-Done-By.'

'What time was it?'

'Eleven maybe? I didn't look at the clock.'

'Where did you send him?'

'Nowhere.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I answered his questions.'

Maigret speared some olives from a tray on the counter and ate them one by one, looking as if he was thinking about something else.

As soon as he'd entered and the barman had stood up behind his counter, he had recognized him as a Corsican named Albert Falconi, whom he had sent to prison at least twice on the charge of illegal gambling and once for smuggling gold across the Belgian border. Another time, Falconi had been suspected of killing a member of the Marseille gang in Montmartre, but there had been no evidence against him and he had been released.

He must have been about thirty-five.

On both sides, they avoided pointless words. They were professionals, so to speak, and the sentences they uttered had their full weight of meaning.

'When you read the paper on Tuesday, did you recognize the girl?'

Albert didn't deny it, didn't admit anything, continued to look at

Maigret impassively.

'How many customers were here when she came in on Monday night?'

Maigret looked down the row of stools in the narrow room. There are a number of bars like this in Paris, and a passer-by dropping in when they are empty might wonder how they make a living. They get by thanks to a hard core of regular customers, all from more or less the same circles, who are in the habit of meeting there at the same time every day.

In the morning, Albert probably didn't bother to open. Most likely, he had only just arrived and hadn't finished arranging the bottles. In the evening, on the other hand, all the stools were doubtless occupied, leaving just enough room to squeeze past. At the far end was the top of a steep staircase leading to the basement.

The barman, too, seemed to be counting the stools. 'It was pretty much full,' he said eventually.

'Was it between midnight and one o'clock?'

'Much closer to one than midnight.'

'Had you seen her before?'

'That was the first time.'

Everyone must have turned to Louise and looked her up and down with a degree of curiosity. The few women who frequented the bar were prostitutes, and they were quite different from this girl. Her faded evening gown and the velvet cape that hadn't been made for her must surely have caused something of a sensation.

'What did she do?'

Albert frowned, like a man trying to remember. 'She sat down.'

'Where?'

He looked again at the stools. 'About where you are now. It was the only free seat near the door.'

'What did she have to drink?'

'A Martini.'

'Did she immediately order a Martini?'

'When I asked her what she was having.'

'And then?'

'She sat there for a while without saying anything.'

'Did she have a handbag?'

'She'd put it down on the bar. A silver bag.'

'Did Lognon ask you these questions?'

'Not in the same order.'

‘Carry on.’

‘I prefer to answer questions.’

‘Did she ask you if you had a letter for her?’

He nodded.

‘Where was the letter?’

He turned, as if in slow motion, and pointed to a gap between two bottles that probably didn’t see much service, where there were two or three envelopes addressed to customers. ‘Here.’

‘Did you give it to her?’

‘I asked her for her identity card.’

‘Why?’

‘Because that’s what I’d been told to do.’

‘Who by?’

‘The guy.’

He never said more than was absolutely necessary, and during the silences he was clearly trying to predict the next question.

‘Jimmy?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know his surname?’

‘No. In bars, people don’t usually give their surnames.’

‘That depends on the kind of bar.’

Albert shrugged as if to say he wasn’t offended.

‘Did he speak French?’

‘Quite well for an American.’

‘What kind of man was he?’

‘You know as well as I do, don’t you?’

‘Tell me anyway.’

‘I had the impression he’d spent a good few years behind bars.’

‘A short man, thin, ill-looking?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was he here on Monday?’

‘He’d left Paris five or six days earlier.’

‘Before that, did he come every day?’

Albert nodded patiently. As the glasses were empty, he grabbed the bottle of Pernod. ‘He spent most of his time here.’

‘Do you know where he lived?’

‘Probably in a hotel in the area, I don’t know which one.’

‘Had he already given you the envelope?’

‘No. He’d only told me that if the girl came asking for it, I should tell her what time she could find him here.’

‘And what time was that?’

‘The afternoon from four, then almost all evening until late.’

‘What time do you close?’

‘Two or three in the morning, it all depends.’

‘Did he talk to you?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘About himself?’

‘About this and that.’

‘Did he tell you he was just out of prison?’

‘That’s the impression he gave.’

‘Sing Sing?’

‘I think so. If Sing Sing is in New York State, on the banks of the Hudson, that’s the one.’

‘Did he tell you what was in the envelope?’

‘No. Only that it was important. He was in a hurry to get away.’

‘Because of the police?’

‘Because of his daughter. She’s getting married next week in Baltimore. That’s why he had to leave and couldn’t wait any more.’

‘Did he describe the girl who’d be coming?’

‘No. He only told me to make sure it was her. That’s why I asked her for her identity card.’

‘Did she read the letter in the bar?’

‘She went downstairs.’

‘What’s downstairs?’

‘The toilets and the telephones.’

‘You think she went downstairs to read her letter?’

‘I assume so.’

‘Did she take her handbag down with her?’

‘Yes.’

‘How did she look when she came back up?’

‘Less depressed than before.’

‘Had she been drinking before she got here?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

‘What did she do next?’

‘She sat down again at the bar.’

‘Did she order another Martini?’

‘She didn’t. The other American did.’

‘What other American?’

‘A big guy with a scar and cauliflower ears.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘I don’t even know his first name.’

‘When did he start coming to your bar?’

‘Round about the same time as Jimmy.’

‘Did they know each other?’

‘Jimmy definitely didn’t know him.’

‘Did he know Jimmy?’

‘I got the idea he was following him.’

‘Did he always come at the same time?’

‘Pretty much, in a big grey car he parked outside the door.’

‘Did Jimmy talk to you about him?’

‘He asked me if I knew him.’

‘And you told him you didn’t?’

‘That’s right. He seemed worried about it. Then he told me it was probably the FBI wondering what he was doing in France and keeping an eye on him.’

‘Do you think that was it?’

‘I stopped thinking about anything a long time ago.’

‘When Jimmy left for the United States, did this other man keep coming?’

‘Yes, regularly.’

‘Was there a name on the envelope?’

‘Louise Laboine. And the word Paris.’

‘Could the other customers see that from where they were sitting?’

‘Definitely not.’

‘Do you ever leave the bar for a moment?’

‘Not when it’s full of people. I don’t trust anyone.’

‘Did he say anything to the girl?’

‘He asked her if he could buy her a drink.’

‘Did she accept?’

‘She looked at me as if she wanted my advice. It was obvious she wasn’t used to it.’

‘Did you make a sign to her to accept?’

‘I didn’t make any signs. I just served two Martinis. Then I was called to the other end of the counter and didn’t pay any more attention to them.’

‘Did the girl and the American leave together?’

‘I think so.’

‘In his car?’

‘I heard the sound of an engine.’

‘Is this all you told Lognon?’

‘No. He asked me more questions.’

‘What questions?’

‘For example, if the guy had made any phone calls. I told him he hadn’t. Then if I knew where he lived. I told him I didn’t know that either. Finally, if I had any idea where he might have gone.’

Albert gave Maigret a significant look and waited.

‘Well?’

‘Now you’ll know as much as Inspector Hard-Done-By. The day before, the American had asked me the best way to drive to Brussels. I told him to go via Saint-Denis, Compiègne, then—’

‘Is that all?’

‘No. Maybe an hour before the girl came in, he mentioned Brussels again. This time, he wanted to know what the best hotel was. I told him I always stayed at the Palace, opposite the Gare du Nord.’

‘What time was it when you told Lognon this?’

‘Nearly one in the morning. It took longer than with you, because I had customers to serve.’

‘Do you have a railway timetable?’

‘If it’s to find out about trains to Brussels, don’t bother. The inspector went downstairs to phone the station. There were no more trains that night. The first was at five in the morning.’

‘Did he tell you he’d be taking it?’

‘He didn’t need to tell me.’

‘What do you think he did until five in the morning?’

‘What would you have done?’

Maigret thought this over. He had just heard about two foreigners who both seemed to have lived in the area and who had both discovered Pickwick’s Bar.

‘Do you think Lognon made the rounds of the local hotels?’

‘You’re the one investigating, aren’t you? I’m not responsible for what Inspector Hard-Done-By gets up to.’

‘Janvier, can you go downstairs and phone the Palace Hotel in Brussels? Ask them if they’ve seen Lognon. He would have arrived about half past nine in the morning. He may still be waiting for the American to get there by car.’

During Janvier’s absence, he didn’t say a word, and Albert, as if considering the conversation at an end, sat down behind the bar and resumed eating.

Maigret hadn't touched his second drink, but had finished the tray of olives. He was still staring down the length of the room, at the line of stools, the little staircase at the far end, and it was as if he was populating the decor with the people who had been there on Monday night, when Louise Laboine had made her entrance in her blue evening gown and velvet cape, a silver handbag in her hand.

His brow was deeply furrowed. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, but both times he thought better of it.

More than ten minutes went by and the barman had time to finish his meal, collect the breadcrumbs on the counter and drink the last of his coffee. Grabbing a dubious-looking cloth, he was starting to wipe the dust from the bottles on the shelf when Janvier reappeared.

'He's on the line, chief. Do you want to talk to him?'

'There's no point. Tell him he can come back.'

Janvier hesitated, unable to conceal his surprise, wondering if he had heard correctly, if Maigret had really thought it through. Finally, accustomed to obeying, he turned on his heels, murmuring, 'All right!'

As for Albert, he hadn't registered any surprise, but his features had hardened. He was still mechanically wiping the bottles one by one. He could see Maigret in the mirror behind the shelves, even though he had his back to him.

Janvier returned.

'Did he object?' Maigret asked.

'He started to say something, then changed his mind and just said, "Well, if it's an order!" '

Maigret got down off his stool, buttoned up his coat and pulled down his hat. 'Get dressed, Albert,' he said simply.

'What?'

'I said, get dressed. We're going to take a ride to the Quai des Orfèvres.'

Albert didn't seem to understand. 'I can't leave the bar.'

'You have a key, don't you?'

'What exactly is it you want of me? I've told you all I know.'

'Do you want us to take you by force?'

'I'm coming. But …'

He sat alone in the back of the little car and didn't say a word throughout the ride. He stared straight ahead, like a man trying to understand. Janvier didn't say anything either. Maigret smoked his

pipe in silence.

'Upstairs!'

He let him into his office first. In front of him, he asked Janvier:

'What time is it in Washington?'

'It must be eight in the morning.'

'By the time you get through, even if they give you priority, it'll be nearly nine. I want you to get me the FBI. If Clark's there, try and get him on the line. I'd like to talk to him.'

He calmly took off his hat and coat and hung them in their cupboard.

'You can take your coat off. This may take a while.'

'You still haven't told me why—'

'How long were you in this office the day we talked about the gold ingots?'

Albert didn't need to search in his memory. 'Four hours.'

'Did you notice anything in Tuesday morning's newspaper?'

'The photograph of the girl.'

'There was another photograph, of three men, real tough characters, the ones they called the wall breakers. It was three o'clock in the morning when they confessed. They'd been in here for a very long time. *Nearly twenty hours*.'

Maigret went and sat down in his seat and arranged his pipes, as if looking for the best one.

'You preferred to come clean after four hours. Personally, it's all the same to me. There are quite a few of us here, we can take turns and we have all the time in the world.'

He dialled the number of the Brasserie Dauphine.

'Maigret here. Can you send me up a few sandwiches and some beer? … For how many?'

He remembered that Janvier hadn't had lunch either.

'For two! Right away, yes. Four beers, of course.'

He lit his pipe, walked to the window and stood there for a moment watching the movement of cars and pedestrians on Pont Saint-Michel.

Behind him, Albert was lighting a cigarette with a hand he was trying to keep steady. He had the grave air of a man weighing the pros and cons.

'What do you want to know?' he asked at last, still hesitant.

'Everything.'

'I told you the truth.'

‘No.’

Maigret hadn’t turned to look at him. Seen like that, from the back, he really did seem like a man who has nothing else to do but wait, smoking his pipe and gazing out at the bustle of the street.

Albert was silent again. He was silent long enough for the waiter from the brasserie to arrive with his tray, which he put down on the desk.

Maigret went and opened the door to the inspectors’ office. ‘Janvier!’ he called.

Janvier appeared. ‘They’re putting the call through in about twenty minutes.’

‘Help yourself, it’s for both of us,’ Maigret said, motioning him into the adjoining office to get his sandwich and his beer.

Maigret made himself comfortable and started eating. The roles were reversed. Earlier, in Pickwick’s Bar, it was Albert who had been having lunch behind his counter.

Maigret seemed to have forgotten he was there and looked for all the world as if he was thinking about nothing but chewing and taking a swig of beer every now and again. His gaze wandered over the papers scattered on his desk.

‘You’re very sure of yourself, aren’t you?’ Albert said.

Maigret nodded, his mouth full.

‘You think I’m going to confess?’

Maigret shrugged, as if to say he didn’t care.

‘Why did you call Inspector Hard-Done-By back to Paris?’

Maigret smiled.

And at that moment, Albert angrily tore the cigarette he was holding to shreds, burning his fingers in the process. ‘Shit!’ he grunted.

He was too tense to remain seated and stood up, walked to the window, stuck his forehead to the pane of glass and also now looked at the bustle outside.

When he turned, he had made up his mind, his agitation had abated and his muscles had relaxed. Without being invited to, he took a sip from one of the two glasses of beer that were still on the tray, wiped his mouth and sat down again. It was his last gesture of defiance, a way of saving face.

‘How did you guess?’ he asked.

‘I didn’t guess,’ Maigret replied calmly. ‘I *knew* immediately.’

9.

In which it is demonstrated that a staircase can play an important role and in which a handbag plays an even more important one

Maigret took a few puffs at his pipe and looked at Albert in silence. It was as if he was making a dramatic pause, like an actor, to give more weight to what he was about to say. Not that he was playing to the gallery in any way. He barely saw the barman's face. It was Louise Laboine he was thinking about. All the time he had sat silently in the bar in Rue de l'Étoile, while Janvier was downstairs on the telephone, she was the one he'd been trying to see, coming into the bar filled with customers, in her shabby evening gown and the velvet cape that didn't suit her.

'You see,' he said at last, 'at first sight your story's perfect, almost too perfect, and I would have believed it if I hadn't known the girl.'

Surprised, Albert asked in spite of himself, 'You knew her?'

'I've ended up getting to know her quite well.'

As he continued talking, he imagined her hiding under the bed at Mademoiselle Poré's, then, later, arguing with Jeanine Armenieu in their apartment in Rue de Ponthieu. He followed her into her shabby furnished room in Rue d'Aboukir and to the stall outside the store on Boulevard Magenta where she worked in all weathers.

He could have repeated all the phrases that had been used about her, whether by the concierge or by the widow Crêmieux.

He saw her going into Maxim's, just as he saw her, a month later, making her way through the wedding guests at the Roméo.

‘First of all, it’s highly unlikely she would have sat at the bar.’

Because she felt out of place, felt that everybody was looking at her, sure from the start that she was wearing a second-hand dress.

‘Even if she’d sat down, she wouldn’t have ordered a Martini. The mistake you made was thinking of her as just another of your female customers, and when I asked you what she drank, you replied automatically, “A Martini.” ’

‘She didn’t drink anything,’ Albert admitted.

‘And she didn’t go downstairs to read her letter either. As is usually the case in bars like yours that cater for regulars, there’s no notice above the staircase. Even if there had been one, I doubt she’d have had the courage to walk past twenty customers, most of whom were probably drunk to a greater or lesser degree.

‘Last but not least, the newspapers didn’t publish *all* the post-mortem results. They said the dead girl’s stomach contained alcohol, without mentioning that the alcohol was rum. Martini is made with gin and vermouth.’

There was no triumph in Maigret’s voice, perhaps because it was still Louise he was thinking about. He spoke in a low voice, as if to himself.

‘Did you really give her the letter?’

‘I gave her a letter.’

‘You mean an envelope?’

‘Yes.’

‘With blank paper in it?’

‘Yes.’

‘When did you open the real letter?’

‘When I was sure Jimmy had taken the plane for the United States.’

‘Did you have him followed to Orly?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why? You didn’t yet know what it was all about.’

‘A guy who comes out of prison and takes the trouble to cross the ocean in order to give a message to a girl – it had to be something important.’

‘Have you kept the letter?’

‘No, I destroyed it.’

Maigret believed him, convinced that Albert wouldn’t bother to lie any more.

‘What did it say?’

‘Something like: *I may not have paid much attention to you before now, but one day you’ll discover that it was better for you that way. Whatever they tell you about me, don’t judge me too severely. Everyone chooses his own path, especially at an age when we’re lacking in judgement, and afterwards it’s too late. You can trust the person who gives you this letter. By the time you get it, I’ll be dead. Don’t let that make you sad, it’s time for me to go. I have the consolation of knowing that from now on you’ll be well taken care of. As soon as you can, get a passport for the United States. Brooklyn is a borough of New York, you may have learned that at school. There you’ll find, at the address below, a little Polish tailor named …*’

Albert broke off. Maigret motioned to him to continue.

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Yes, you can.’

‘All right, then! … *named Lukasek. Go and see him. Show him your passport and he’ll hand over to you a certain sum in cash …*’

‘Is that all?’

‘There were also three or four sentimental phrases I’ve forgotten.’

‘Do you remember the address?’

‘Yes. 1214 37th Street.’

‘Who did you tell?’

Albert was again tempted to say nothing. But Maigret’s eyes were still on him and he resigned himself. ‘I showed the letter to a friend.’

‘Who?’

‘Bianchi.’

‘Is he still with big Jeanne?’

Bianchi was suspected of being the head of the Corsican gang. Maigret had arrested him at least ten times, but had only once managed to get him sentenced. True, that had been for five years.

Maigret stood up and opened the door to the adjoining office. ‘Is Torrence around?’

They went to fetch him.

‘Take two or three men with you. Find out if big Jeanne is still living in Rue Lepic. There’s a chance you’ll find Bianchi at her place. If he isn’t, make sure she tells you where to find him. Be careful, he’s quite capable of defending himself.’

Albert was listening impassively.

‘Carry on.’

‘What more do you want?’

‘Bianchi couldn’t send just anyone to the United States to show up at Lukasek’s and demand the money. He suspected that the Pole had instructions and would ask for proof of the girl’s identity.’

It was so obvious that he didn’t wait for a reply.

‘So you waited for her to show up at Pickwick’s.’

‘We had no intention of killing her.’

Albert was surprised to hear Maigret reply, ‘I know that.’

They were professionals who didn’t take unnecessary risks. All they needed was the girl’s identity card. Once they had it, they would manage to get a passport for some female associate or other, who would take the place of Louise Laboine.

‘Was Bianchi in your bar?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did she leave without opening the envelope?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did your boss have a car waiting outside?’

‘With the Tattoo Man at the wheel. Given the mess I’m in, I might as well go on.’

‘They followed her?’

‘I wasn’t with them. All I know is what they told me later. There’s no point in you looking for the Tattoo Man in Paris. He got cold feet after what happened and did a runner.’

‘To Marseille?’

‘Probably.’

‘I suppose they intended to steal her handbag?’

‘Yes. They drove past her. Bianchi got out of the car just as she drew level with them. The street was deserted. He grabbed the handbag, not knowing it was attached to the girl’s wrist by a little chain. She fell to her knees. Seeing her open her mouth to scream, he hit her in the face. Apparently she clung to him and tried to call for help. That was when he took a cosh from his pocket and knocked her out.’

‘So you only invented the story of the second American to get Lognon off your backs?’

‘What would you have done in my place? Hard-Done-By fell for it.’

All the same, for most of the investigation, Lognon had almost always been one step ahead of the Police Judiciaire. And if he had been more concerned with the girl’s state of mind, he would finally have had his victory, the victory he had been waiting for for so long

that he'd stopped believing in it.

What was he thinking about now, on the train bringing him back from Brussels? He must be blaming his bad luck, more convinced than ever that the whole world was in league against him. Technically, he had done nothing wrong, and no police training course teaches you to put yourself in the shoes of a girl brought up in Nice by a half-mad mother.

For years, Louise had looked stubbornly for her place without finding it. Lost in a world she didn't understand, she had clung desperately to the first friend she made, a friend who had eventually let her down.

Left alone, she had grown harder, surrounded by a hostile world where she tried in vain to learn the rules of the game.

Did she know anything about her father? Probably not. Even when she was little, she must have wondered why her mother wasn't like other people, why the two of them lived differently from their neighbours.

With all her might, she had tried to adapt. She had run away from home. She had read the small ads. And whereas Jeanine Armenieu had no difficulty finding jobs, she had ended up being thrown out of all the places she had applied to.

Had she, like Lognon, ended up convinced that there was a kind of conspiracy against her?

In what way was she so different? Why did all the bad things happen to her?

Even her death was a kind of irony of fate. If the chain of the silver handbag hadn't been rolled round her wrist, Bianchi would simply have snatched it off her and the car would have sped away.

If she had then told her story to the police, nobody would have believed her.

'Why did they move the body to Place Vintimille?'

'First of all, they couldn't leave it near my bar. Secondly, dressed as she was, she'd look more at home in Montmartre. They chose the first deserted spot they came to up there.'

'Have they already sent someone to the United States consulate?'

'Of course not. They're waiting.'

'Inspector Clark on the line, chief.'

'Put him through to me here.'

It was only confirmation they needed now, and it was more out of personal curiosity than anything else that Maigret still had a few

questions to ask the FBI.

The conversation, as always with Clark, was conducted, half in Maigret's bad English, half in the American's bad French, each making a diligent effort to speak the other's language.

Before Clark could understand what it was all about, Maigret had to list all Julius Van Cram's aliases: Lemke, Stieb, Ziegler, Marek, Spangler, Donley …

It was under the name Donley that he had been buried, a month earlier, at the penitentiary of Sing Sing, where he had been serving an eight-year sentence for another of his confidence tricks.

'Has the money been recovered?'

'Only a small part of it.'

'Was it a lot?'

'Around 100,000 dollars.'

'Was his accomplice's name Jimmy?'

'Jimmy O'Malley. He only got three years and was released two months ago.'

'He took a trip to France.'

'I thought his daughter was getting married soon.'

'He went back for the wedding. The money's in Brooklyn, with a Polish tailor named Lukasek.'

Despite everything, there was a certain quiver of triumph in Maigret's voice.

'Lukasek, who may not even know what he's keeping in trust, has been told to hand the package over to a girl named Louise Laboine.'

'Will she show up?'

'Unfortunately not.'

The word had slipped out. To correct it, he hastened to add:

'She died this week in Paris.'

He exchanged a few more polite remarks – and even a few jokes – with Clark, whom he hadn't seen for several years. When he hung up, he seemed surprised to see Albert still sitting there, smoking a cigarette.

The FBI were almost certainly going to retrieve the money and restore it to some banker it belonged to, or perhaps to an insurance company, because there was a good chance the banker was insured for theft. The little Polish tailor would do a prison term. Probably, for having taken on the errand, Jimmy O'Malley, instead of attending his daughter's wedding in Baltimore, would resume his place in Sing Sing.

Louise's fate had hung on very little, a chain rolled around a wrist. What if Mademoiselle Irène, in Rue de Douai, had given another kind of bag to the girl who had come one evening to borrow a gown from her?

What if she had dropped by Rue de Ponthieu in time for the letter to be handed over to her personally?

Would Louise Laboine have gone to America?

What would she have done then with the 100,000 dollars?

Maigret finished his glass of beer. It was lukewarm. He emptied his pipe, not into the ashtray, but into the coal bucket, knocking it against his heel.

'Can you come in here, Janvier?'

He pointed to Albert, who knew immediately what that meant. He was starting to get used to it.

'Take him to your office, get his statement down, make him sign it and take him to the cells. I'll phone Judge Coméliau.'

All this was just routine. It was no longer of interest to him. Just as Albert was going out, he called him back.

'I was forgetting the three Pernods.'

'It's on the house.'

'I wouldn't hear of it!'

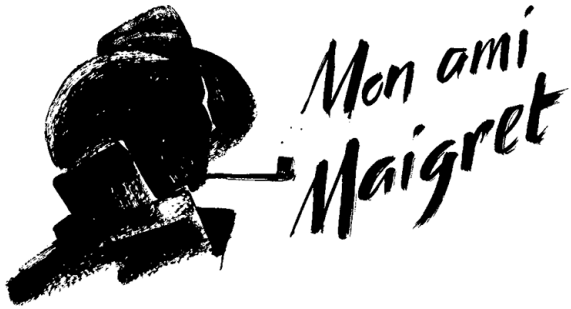
He handed him a few banknotes, saying, as he would have done in the bar in Rue de l'Étoile:

'Keep the change.'

Just as if he was still behind his counter, too, Albert replied mechanically: 'Thanks a lot.'

If you would like to...

Turn the page for an extract from
Maigret and the Minister
by
Georges Simenon


Mon ami
Maigret

GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret and
the Minister
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

1. The Explosive Calame Report

As always when he returned home at night, Maigret paused at the same place, just past the gas lamp, and looked up at the lit windows of his apartment. He was no longer even aware of doing so. Had he been asked point-blank if there was a light on or not, he might have been uncertain. Also out of habit, on the stairs between the second and the third floor, he would start unbuttoning his overcoat to take the key from his trouser pocket, even though the door invariably opened the moment he stepped on to the mat. These rituals established over the years mattered to him more than he cared to admit. For instance, his wife had a particular way of taking his wet umbrella from his hands at the same time as inclining her head to kiss him on the cheek, although she didn't this evening because it wasn't raining.

As usual, he asked:

'No telephone calls?'

Closing the door, she replied:

'Yes, there was one. I'm afraid there's no point taking off your coat.'

The day had been overcast, neither cold nor warm, with a sudden downpour at around two o'clock in the afternoon. At Quai des Orfèvres, Maigret had done nothing but deal with routine matters.

'Did you have a nice dinner?'

The light in their apartment was cosier, more intimate than at the office. He could see the newspapers and his slippers waiting by his armchair.

'I had dinner at the Brasserie Dauphine with the chief, Lucas and Janvier.'

Then the four of them had gone to the Police Association meeting. For the past three years, Maigret had been elected vice chairman despite his unwillingness.

‘You have time for a cup of coffee. You might as well take off your coat. I said you wouldn’t be home before eleven.’

It was half past ten. The meeting had not lasted long. A small group of them had gone for a beer in a brasserie and Maigret had come home on the Métro.

‘Who telephoned?’

‘A minister.’

Standing in the middle of the living room, he frowned at her.

‘Which minister?’

‘The one for public works. His name is Point, if I heard him correctly.’

‘Auguste Point, yes. He telephoned here? In person?’

‘Yes.’

‘Didn’t you tell him to call Quai des Orfèvres?’

‘It’s you he wants to speak to. He needs to see you right away. When I told him you weren’t home, he asked if I was the maid. He sounded annoyed. I said I was Madame Maigret. He apologized and wanted to know where you were, when you’d be back. He gave me the impression he was a shy man.’

‘That’s not his reputation.’

‘He even asked me whether I was alone or not. Then he explained that his phone call must remain a secret, that he wasn’t telephoning from the ministry but from a public booth, and that he needed to talk to you as soon as possible.’

All the time she was speaking Maigret looked at her, still frowning, with an expression that spoke volumes about his distaste for politics. On several occasions, over the course of his career, a statesman, deputy, senator or some high-up figure had requested his services, but always through the usual channels. Each time he had been called in to see the chief and, each time, the conversation had begun with:

‘I’m sorry, Maigret, I’m putting you in charge of a case you’re not going to like.’

And, invariably, they were rather unpleasant cases.

He did not know Auguste Point personally and had never seen him in the flesh. He wasn’t one of those politicians who were always in the papers.

‘Why didn’t he telephone HQ?’

He was talking more to himself, but Madame Maigret replied all the same:

‘How should I know? I’m just repeating what he said to me. Firstly, that he was calling from a public booth …’

That detail had struck Madame Maigret, for whom a government minister was a person of considerable importance, and she found it hard to imagine him going into a public phone booth on some street corner at night.

‘… then, that you were not to go to the ministry, but to his private apartment …’

She glanced at a piece of paper on which she’d scribbled a few words.

‘… 27, Boulevard Pasteur. You don’t need to disturb the concierge. It’s on the fourth floor, the left-hand door.’

‘Is he waiting there for me?’

‘He’ll wait as long as he has to. But he should be back at the ministry before midnight, to keep up appearances.’

Changing her tone, she asked:

‘Do you think it’s a prank?’

He shook his head. It was certainly unusual, odd, but it didn’t sound like a prank.

‘Are you going to drink your coffee?’

‘No, thank you. Not on top of beer.’

He got up and poured himself a drop of sloe gin, took a fresh pipe from the mantelpiece and headed for the door.

‘See you later.’

When he stepped out on to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, the damp that had been in the air all day began to condense into a dusty fog that formed a halo around the lights. He did not hail a taxi; it would be just as quick to get to Boulevard Pasteur by Métro. Perhaps his reluctance was also because he didn’t feel this was official business.

All the way there, staring absently at a moustachioed gentleman opposite him who was reading the newspaper, he wondered what Auguste Point could want of him, and particularly why he wanted such an urgent and secretive meeting.

What he knew about Point was that he was a lawyer from Vendée – from La Roche-sur-Yon, if he wasn’t mistaken – who had entered politics late in life. He was one of those deputies elected after the war for their integrity and their conduct during the Occupation.

What he had done exactly, Maigret didn’t know. The fact remained that while some of his colleagues passed through the

Chamber without leaving any trace, Point had been re-elected time and again and had been given the public works portfolio three months earlier, during the formation of the latest cabinet.

Maigret had not heard any rumours about him, unlike most politicians who were dogged by gossip. His wife kept out of the public eye, and so did his children, if he had any.

By the time he emerged from the Métro at Pasteur, the fog had thickened and turned yellowish and Maigret recognized the dusty tang on his lips. He saw no one in the street but could hear footsteps in the distance, towards Montparnasse, and, from the same direction, a train whistling as it left the station.

Some windows were still lit and, in the haze, they exuded an air of calm, of security. These buildings, neither luxurious nor poor, neither new nor old, with apartments that were all very similar, were the homes of middle-class people – teachers, civil servants and office workers, who took their Métro or their bus at the same time every day.

He pressed the bell and, when the door opened, muttered an inaudible name as he made his way over to the lift.

The cramped two-person cage ascended slowly but smoothly and silently through the gloomy stairwell. The doors on each landing were painted the same dark brown, and the doormats were identical.

He rang the bell of the left-hand door, which opened at once, as if someone had been waiting, their hand on the knob.

Point took three steps forwards to send the lift back down, which Maigret had not thought to do.

'I apologize for having brought you out so late,' he muttered. 'Come this way …'

Madame Maigret would have been disappointed because he was as different as possible from how she imagined a minister. He was just like Maigret in height and build, only broader and more rugged. He looked like a farmer, and his strong features, his large nose and his mouth made Maigret think of a head carved out of chestnut.

He was wearing a greyish, nondescript suit and a ready-knotted tie. Two things were particularly striking: his bushy eyebrows, as wide and thick as a moustache, and the long hairs on his hands.

He looked Maigret up and down unashamedly, without even giving a polite smile.

‘Have a seat, inspector.’

The apartment, smaller than Maigret’s on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, could not have comprised more than two rooms, perhaps three, and a tiny kitchen. From the hall, where a few items of clothing hung, they went into a study that resembled a bachelor’s lodgings. There were some pipes in a rack on the wall, ten or twelve, several of clay, and a very fine meerschaum. An old-fashioned writing desk, with pigeon-holes and lots of little drawers, like the one that had once belonged to Maigret’s father, was strewn with papers and ash. He did not dare look at the photographs on the walls immediately – Point’s father and mother, in the same black-and-gold frames that he would have found in a farm house in Vendée.

Sitting in his swivel chair, again just like the one Maigret’s father used to have, Point casually caressed a box of cigars.

‘I suppose …’ he began.

Maigret smiled and muttered:

‘I prefer my pipe.’

‘Tobacco?’

The minister offered him an open packet of shag and re-lit a pipe he had allowed to go out.

‘You must have been surprised when your wife told you …’

He was trying to find a way to begin the conversation but was not happy with his opening. Something quite strange was occurring. In the peaceful, warm study, the two of them, of the same build and around the same age, sat watching each other quite openly. It was as if they were discovering similarities, intrigued by the resemblance but hesitant to acknowledge eachother as brothers.

‘Listen, Maigret. There’s no point speechifying. I only know you from reading about you in the papers and from what I’ve heard about you.’

‘The same here, minister.’

Point gave a dismissive wave as if to say that there was no need for formality between them.

‘I’m in a jam. So far, no one knows, no one has any idea; not the president of the Council, not even my wife, who usually knows about everything I do. You’re the person I called.’

He looked away for a moment and puffed on his pipe as if embarrassed by what he had just said, which might sound like flattery or self-interest.

‘I didn’t want to go through the usual channels and speak to the head of the Police Judiciaire. Contacting you directly is irregular. You weren’t under any obligation to come, and you have no obligation to help me.’

He rose with a sigh.

‘Will you have a little drink?’

And, with what could pass for a smile:

‘Don’t worry. I’m not trying to bribe you. It is just that this evening I really need a drink.’

He went into the adjacent room and came back with a bottle that had already been opened and two tumblers like those used in country inns.

‘It’s just the local brandy that my father distils every autumn. This one is around twenty years old.’

Glass in hand, they looked at one another.

‘To your health.’

‘To yours, minister.’

This time, Point did not appear to hear the last word.

‘If I don’t know where to begin, it’s not because I feel awkward in front of you, but because it’s difficult to tell the story clearly. Do you read the newspapers?’

‘On evenings when the miscreants leave me the leisure.’

‘Do you follow politics?’

‘Not really.’

‘You know that I am not what people call a politician?’ Maigret nodded.

‘Right! You’ve heard, of course, about the Clairfond disaster?’

This time Maigret couldn’t help giving a shudder, and a certain disappointment, a certain wariness must have shown on his face, because Point bowed his head, adding in a low voice:

‘Unfortunately, that’s what this is about.’

Earlier, in the Métro, Maigret had tried to guess what the minister wanted to talk to him about in secret. He hadn’t thought of the Clairfond affair, which the papers had been full of for the past month.

The Clairfond sanatorium in Haute-Savoie, between Ugine and Megève, at an altitude of over 1,400 metres, was one of the most spectacular post-war constructions.

Maigret could not remember who had floated the idea of building for the most disadvantaged children an establishment on a par with

modern private sanatoria, because it had been a few years back. There had been a lot of talk about it at the time. Some thought the motivation was purely political, and there had been heated arguments in the Chamber. A special committee had been set up to examine the project, which had eventually been built after years of opposition.

A month earlier, disaster had struck, one of the most appalling ever. The snows had begun to thaw earlier than had ever happened within living memory. The mountain torrents had swollen, as had a subterranean river, the Lize, such a minor river that it wasn't even on the maps, but it had undermined the foundations of an entire wing of Clairfond.

The investigation, begun immediately after the disaster, was still underway. The experts couldn't agree. And the newspapers, depending on their stripe, defended different theories.

One hundred and twenty-eight children had died when one of the buildings had collapsed, and the others had been urgently evacuated.

After a moment's silence, Maigret muttered:

'You weren't a member of the cabinet when Clairfond was built, were you?'

'No. I wasn't even a member of the parliamentary commission that voted to fund it. The fact is that until a few days ago, all I knew about the affair was what everyone else knows from the newspapers.'

He took a while.

'You've heard of the Calame Report, inspector?' Maigret looked at him in surprise and shook his head.

'You will do. You'll probably hear too much about it. I don't suppose you read the weeklies, *La Rumeur*, for example?'

'Never.'

'Do you know Hector Tabard?'

'By name and reputation. My colleagues at Rue des Saussaies must know him better than I do.'

He was alluding to the Sûreté Nationale, which was often given missions directly or indirectly related to politics since it was under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior.

Tabard was a corrupt journalist whom the weekly scandal sheet used when they wanted to blackmail someone.

'Read this, it was published six days after the tragedy.' It was

brief, enigmatic:

> *Will they decide, one day, under the pressure of public opinion, to disclose the contents of the Calame Report?*

'Is that all?' asked Maigret, surprised.

'Here's a quote from the following issue.'

> *Contrary to the generally accepted idea, it is not over foreign policy or because of the events in North Africa that the current government will be brought down before spring is out, but because of the Calame Report. Who is in possession of the Calame Report?*

The words 'Calame Report' sounded almost comical and Maigret smiled as he asked:

'Who is Calame?'

But Point was not smiling. Emptying his pipe into the huge copper ashtray, he explained:

'A professor at the École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées. He died two years ago, of cancer if I'm not mistaken. The public hasn't heard of him, but he's famous in the world of applied mechanics and civil engineering. Calame was sometimes brought in as a consultant on major projects, in countries as far afield as Japan and South America, and he was a leading authority on materials resistance, especially concrete. He wrote a book that neither you nor I have read but which all architects have, entitled *The Diseases of Concrete.*'

'Was Calame involved in the Clairfond project?'

'Indirectly. Let me tell you the story another way, according to a more personal sequence of events. At the time of the disaster, as I told you, I knew nothing of the sanatorium other than what I'd read in the newspapers. I couldn't even remember whether I'd voted for or against the project five years earlier. I had to check in *L'Officiel* to find that I'd voted for it. I don't read *La Rumeur* either. It was only after the second short item that the president of the Council took me aside and asked:

' "Are you familiar with the Calame Report?"

'I was honest with him and said no. He seemed surprised and I felt he looked at me with some mistrust.

' "Well, it must be among your files," he said.

'Then he put me in the picture. During the debates on the Clairfond issue five years ago, since the parliamentary committee was divided, a deputy – I don't know who – proposed

commissioning a report from an engineer of unquestionable integrity.

'He suggested Professor Julien Calame, of the École des Ponts et Chaussées, and Calame spent a while examining the plans and even visited the site in Haute-Savoie.

'Then he wrote a report which should have been passed on to the committee.'

Maigret believed he had understood.

'Was the report damning?'

'Wait. When the president spoke to me about the affair, he had already ordered a search through the parliamentary archives. The report should have been among the committee's files. But not only is it not there, some of the minutes of the meetings have also disappeared.

'Do you see what that means?'

'That there are certain people who have a vested interest in that report never being published?'

'Read this.'

It was another cutting from *La Rumeur*, also short, but no less threatening:

> *Will Monsieur Arthur Nicoud be powerful enough to prevent the Calame Report from seeing the light of day?*

Maigret knew that name as he knew hundreds of others. He had heard of the firm Nicoud & Sauvegrain, because their name cropped up almost everywhere there were public works – roads, bridges or locks.

'It's Nicoud & Sauvegrain that built Clairfond.'

Maigret began to wish he hadn't come. While he felt a natural sympathy for Auguste Point, the story that the minister was telling him made him feel as ill at ease as when he heard smutty stories being told in front of a woman.

He couldn't help trying to guess the role that Point might have played in the tragedy that had cost the lives of 128 children. He was on the verge of asking him outright:

'What is your part in all this?'

He guessed that a lot of people were implicated – politicians, prominent figures perhaps.

'I shall try to be brief. The president asked me to undertake a painstaking search through the archives of my ministry. The École

des Ponts et Chaussées comes directly under the Ministry of Public Works. Logically, we should have at the very least a copy of the Calame Report somewhere in our files.'

The famous words came back: *Calame Report.*

'You didn't find anything?'

'Nothing. We rummaged through tons of dusty papers, even in the attics.'

Uncomfortable in his armchair, Maigret was beginning to fidget, and Point noticed.

'You don't like politics?'

'I admit it.'

'Neither do I. Strange as that may seem, the reason I agreed to stand for election twelve years ago was to fight against politics. And when I was invited to become a member of the cabinet three months ago, again it was with the intention of cleaning up public affairs that I allowed myself to be persuaded. My wife and I are simple people. As you can see from our Paris home, where we've been staying when parliament is in session ever since I was elected a deputy. It's more of a bachelor pad. My wife could have stayed in La Roche-sur-Yon, where we have our house, but we're not used to being apart.'

He spoke matter-of-factly, without any sentimentality in his voice.

'Since I've been a minister our official home has been in the ministry, on Boulevard Saint-Germain, but we escape here as often as we can, especially on Sundays.

'But none of this matters. If I called from a public telephone booth, as your wife must have told you – because, unless I'm mistaken, your wife is very much like mine – if I called you from a public telephone booth, as I was saying, it is because I'm wary of phone-tapping. Rightly or wrongly, I am convinced that my calls from the ministry, perhaps those from this apartment too, are being recorded somewhere, I'd rather not know where. What's more, I'm not too proud to confess that on the way here I entered a cinema on the Boulevards via one door and exited via another, and switched taxis twice. I still couldn't swear that the building isn't under surveillance.'

'I didn't see anyone when I arrived.'

Now Maigret felt a sort of pity. Until now, Point had tried to speak in a detached tone. But on getting down to the main issue, he

hummed and hawed and beat around the bush as if he were afraid that Maigret would get the wrong idea about him.

'The ministry's archives were turned upside down and goodness knows there is plenty of paperwork there which no living person has any recollection of. Twice a day at least during that time I received a phone call from the president, and I am not sure he trusts me.

'We combed through the archives of the École des Ponts et Chaussées as well without any luck until yesterday morning.'

Maigret couldn't help asking, as at the end of a novel:

'And did you find the Calame Report?'

'Something that appears to be the Calame Report, in any case.'

'Where?'

'In an attic at the École.'

'A teacher?'

'A supervisor. Yesterday afternoon, I was given a note from a certain Piquemal, whom I had never heard of, on which was written in pencil: "In connection with the Calame Report". I sent for him straight away. I took the precaution of asking my secretary, Mademoiselle Blanche, to leave, even though she's been with me for twenty years, because she's from La Roche-sur-Yon and used to work in my legal practice. You'll understand why that means something. My principal private secretary wasn't in the room either. I was alone with a middle-aged man with a fixed gaze, who stood before me without saying a word, a package wrapped in grey paper under his arm.

' "Monsieur Piquemal?" I asked, slightly anxious because for a moment I thought I was dealing with a madman.

'He nodded.

' "Have a seat."

' "There's no point."

'I had the sense that there was no kindness in his eyes. 'He asked me, almost rudely:

' "Are you the minister?"

' "Yes."

' "I'm a supervisor at the École des Ponts et Chaussées."

'He took a couple of steps forwards and held out the package, saying in the same tone:

' "Open it and give me a receipt."

'The package contained a document of about forty pages, which

was obviously a carbon copy: “Report on the Construction of a Sanatorium in the Village of Clairfond, Haute-Savoie”.

‘The document wasn’t signed, but Julien Calame’s name and position were typed on the last page, with the date.

‘Still standing, Piquemal repeated:

‘ “I want a receipt.”

‘I wrote him one by hand. He folded it and slipped it into a shabby wallet, and made for the door. I called him back.

‘ “Where did you find those papers?”

‘ “In the attic.”

‘ “You will probably be asked to make a written statement.”

‘ “You know where to find me.”

‘ “You haven’t shown this document to anyone?”

‘He looked me in the eyes with contempt:

‘ “No one.”

‘ “There weren’t any other copies?”

‘ “Not that I’m aware of.”

‘ “Thank you.” ’

Point looked at him, embarrassed.

‘That’s where I made a mistake,’ he went on. ‘I think it was because of the strangeness of this Piquemal, because I can picture an anarchist behaving in the same way when throwing a bomb.’

‘How old?’ asked Maigret.

‘Forty-five, perhaps. Neither well nor badly dressed. His stare is that of a madman or a fanatic.’

‘Did you check up on him?’

‘Not at the time. It was five p.m. There were still four or five people in my waiting room, and that evening I had to preside over an engineers’ dinner. Knowing that my visitor had left, my secretary came back and I slipped the Calame file into my personal briefcase.

‘I should have telephoned the president of the Council. If I didn’t, I swear to you, it was, once again, because I wondered whether Piquemal was mad. There was no proof that the document was genuine. Almost every day we receive visits from people who are mentally unbalanced.’

‘So do we.’

‘Then perhaps you’ll understand. My meetings went on until seven p.m. I just had the time to nip into my apartment and get changed for dinner.’

‘Did you mention the Calame Report to your wife?’

‘No. I took my briefcase with me. I told her that after the dinner I’d drop into Boulevard Pasteur. I do that quite often. Not only do we come here together on Sundays for a little dinner that she cooks for just the two of us, but also I come here on my own when I have important work to do and I need peace and quiet.’

‘Where was the dinner?’

‘At the Palais d’Orsay.’

‘Did you take the briefcase with you?’

‘I left it locked in the car in the care of my driver, whom I trust absolutely.’

‘Did you return here immediately afterwards?’

‘At around 10.30. Ministers are lucky enough not to have to stay after the speech.’

‘Were you in a dinner jacket?’

‘I took it off to sit down at my desk.’

‘Did you read the report?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did it seem authentic?’

The minister nodded.

‘Would it really be a bombshell if it were published?’

‘There’s no doubt.’

‘Why?’

‘Because Professor Calame virtually foresaw the disaster. Even though I’m in charge of public works, I’m not capable of explaining his reasoning, particularly the technical details he gives in support of his argument. The fact is that he took a clear, unquestionable stance against the project, and it was the duty of anyone having read the report to vote against the building of Clairfond as it was envisaged, or at least to demand an additional study. Do you understand?’

‘I’m beginning to.’

‘How *La Rumeur* found out about the document, I have no idea. Do they have a copy? I don’t know that either. As far as I am aware, the only person in possession of a copy of the Calame Report last night was myself.’

‘What happened?’

‘Around midnight, I telephoned the president of the Council, but I was told he was at a political meeting in Rouen. I nearly called him there …’

‘But you didn’t?’

‘No. Because I was worried about the phone being tapped. I felt as if I had a box of dynamite here capable not only of blowing up the government but of bringing a number of my colleagues into disrepute. It is impossible that those who read the report could have insisted on …’

Maigret thought he could guess the rest.

‘Did you leave the report in this apartment?’

‘Yes.’

‘In the study?’

‘It has a lock. I thought it was safer here than at the ministry, where too many people I barely know pass through.’

‘Was your driver waiting downstairs all the time you were reading the report?’

‘I’d sent him home. I took a taxi at the corner of the street.’

‘Did you talk to your wife when you got home?’

‘Not about the Calame Report. I didn’t breathe a word about it to anyone until the next day, at one p.m, when I met the president at the Chamber. I informed him in a window recess.’

‘Did he seem worried?’

‘I think he was. Any government leader would have been. He asked me to fetch the report and bring it to him in person to his office.’

‘And the report had gone from your study?’

‘Yes.’

‘Had the lock been forced?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Did you see the president again?’

‘No. I felt genuinely ill. I had a driver take me to Boulevard Saint-Germain and I postponed all my meetings. My wife telephoned the president and told him I was unwell, that I’d fainted, and that I’d go and see him tomorrow morning.’

‘Does your wife know?’

‘For the first time in my life I lied to her. I don’t know exactly what I told her, and I must have broken off several times.’

‘Does she know you’re here?’

‘She thinks I’m at a meeting. I wonder whether you understand my predicament. I find myself suddenly alone, with the feeling that the moment I open my mouth, everyone will attack me. No one will believe my story. I had the Calame Report in my hands. I am the only person, apart from Piquemal, to have held it. *Worse still, on at*

least three occasions in the past few years I've been the guest of Arthur Nicoud, of the engineering firm in question, at his estate in Samois.'

He suddenly flagged. His shoulders became less broad, his chin dropped. He seemed to be saying: 'Do what you like. I don't know any more.'

Without asking permission, Maigret poured himself a brandy and only after raising it to his lips did it occur to him to refill the minister's glass.

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